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HELL on the PECOS

By ED EARL REPP

A FULL-LENGTH WESTERN NOVEL!

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For many years a great strip of fertile land along the eastern base of the El Pasos lay idle. Rustled into poverty the original ranchers had long since left, giving the outlaws free run of the country. It had become known as "Rustlers' Roost" and there the law of the gun was the only recognized law of the land.

The West had never known a harder looking bunch of cutthroats than the Harper gang. Old Kiowa, "Pap" as his sons called him, was a nondescript hellion with murder in his eye and a nasty habit of killing anyone standing in his way. His four half-breed sons, Gabe, Jessie, Rufe and Lafe, were able first lieutenants in death dealing.

But Montana Larkin and Bull Tate had staked a legal claim in this valley and aimed to hold on to it. And when two honest, fighting hombres engage in bloody guerrilla war with a bunch of thieves and murderers allied with a crooked sheriff, there is bound to be lots of fighting, hell-raising and gunplay.

HELL ON THE PECOS

By
ED EARL REPP

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CHAPTER I

IN THE opinion of most of Pecos, Montana Larkin, foreman of Jim Parkins' Jay Bar Pee horse ranch which sprawled southward along the western base of the arrogant El Pasos from Mustang Mesa to within a few miles of town, was a mild-tempered, well-liked buckaroo until he got mad. For Montana Larkin, since cleaning up the sordid mess made of the Jay Bar Pee by its most recent foreman, Gil Gillespie, and his outlaw associates from Rustlers' Roost, had earned the reputation of being one of the scrappiest hombres in West Texas, and fused dynamite with a six-gun, to boot.

Montana Larkin was bordering on thirty now. But he looked no more than twenty-five. He had a clean-cut boyish face, straight nose and a fighting man's chin. He had the body-build of a young giant, which he was, standing two or three inches over six feet. His hair, when the rays of a slanting sun struck it, was red.

More than once he had demonstrated the toughness of his Montana skin in and about Pecos. Particularly when he and Bull Tate, an itinerant gunman who had befriended him in the darkest moment of his life, saving him from a blood-thirsty posse led by Sheriff Blaze Clark, had completely ventilated Rustlers' Roost by burning the feared outlaw stronghold to the ground. After that demonstration, which had been made to clear his name of the stigma placed upon it with the murder of old Jinglebob Morgan by Gil Gillespie, had come further proof that he was made of man-stuff. For he had ridden with Tate, known on the Texas borders as *Senor Satan,* down the great Panhandle into Mexico to rescue Margy Parkins from the horse-stealing, murdering Mr. Gillespie who, after rustling the Jay Bar hopelessly into debt, had kidnaped her.

But all that had happened close to two years past. In the rescue of Margy, Tate had been seriously wounded by a Mexican bullet as they were recrossing the muddy Rio Grande to the Texas side. The gunman had fallen from his horse in mid-stream and they had seen him no more, returning to the Jay Bar convinced that he had sunk to an inglorious death. Since then Montana Larkin had mingled with only the best society in Pecos.

Just why he stooped now to go beneath himself, the cattlemen and cowboys holding session at the bar in the Red Onion Saloon did not know. Perhaps it was because he seldom drank and needing relaxation from the hard work of raising Parkins' blooded Morgans for the United States Cavalry, he had casually sat in a poker game running wide open in a corner. Montana Larkin was not a gambling addict. But he knew his cards as well as he knew horses. He also knew that the hawk-nosed, beady-eyed individual opposite

him was performing certain sleight of hand tricks that were sure to get him in trouble before long if he kept it up.

Montana Larkin's blue eyes seemed placid enough as he watched the other man deal. They were almost hidden beneath the wide brim of his ten gallon Stetson. But tempest was raging like a festering sore in his usually mild-tempered soul as for the third successive time he saw the blackleg deftly slip a card from the bottom of the deck and deal it to himself.

Something seemed to snap suddenly deep within him. Not since discovering the body of his old sidekick, Jinglebob Morgan, out on Mustang Mesa almost two years previous, had he felt a repetition of that snapping inside of him.

"That's the third time, hombre!" he said ominously from between his white, hard-set teeth. "Do yuh figger on doin' it again?"

The other halted his dealing abruptly and glowered back, a malicious scowl on his dark-skinned face. As if anticipating trouble he shifted the card deck into his left hand and dropped his right down to his side. With every nerve tense and ready to do the bidding of his angry brain, Montana carefully sized him up for the first time and decided silently that he did not like the cut of his thin, red mouth. He was, as far as he was concerned, a stranger in Pecos. He had never seen him before. With two other men, one of whom the buckeroo knew casually, he had been playing a quiet game of poker when he entered the saloon.To spend an hour's time waiting for his boss to finish his business in the general store across the street, he had sat in the game to play a few rounds.

"Do I figger on doin' *what* agin?" the blackleg demanded viciously.

"Dealin' off'n the bottom o' the deck, hombre!" he accused coldly. "This makes the third time yuh've done it! Every time yuh get the cards for a deal yuh slip yuhrself a winnin' hand off'n the bottom!"

The trickster's black eyes flashed with a look of hatred and white patches showed plainly on his high cheek bones.

"Yuh're a liar, Larkin!" he roared murderously.

Instantly the other two players tipped back their chairs and dropped out of sight. The men along the bar scattered to get out of line of expected bullets. The two bartenders melted mechanically behind the mahogany. Montana Larkin half rose in his chair, his dark face set in a cold mask. As he did so the blackleg went for the black-butted .45 that hung at his side. It had cleared leather, and no more, when the buckeroo's six-gun appeared like magic in his right hand. The gambler's face went white as he found himself staring into the muzzle of Montana's gun.

"Drop that gun, hombre!" Montana commanded in a brittle tone. His eyes were cold as chips of glacial ice. "I'm gonna teach yuh that it ain't healthy t' cheat honest gents in Pecos! Drop that hogleg, or I'll shore as hell ventilate yuh!"

His command was rewarded instantly by the thud of the other's heavy six-

shooter on the floor. The man breathed a sigh of relief with a sudden inspiration that the buckeroo did not intend to shoot him down. But he did not relax. Instead he stood up, thrust his hard face forward and growled deep in his throat.

"I'll fight yuh any way yuh want t' fight, *amigo!*" he thundered viciously. "Hain't no man livin' what kin call me a blackleg an' git away without a beatin' or a bullet! Ef you're aimin' t' fight me with yuhr fists, don't stand there starin' at me! I'm a-waitin' fer yuh t' start teachin'!"

A hush fell over the saloon as Montana shoved his .45 back into its holster, unbuckled his belt and laid it on an empty table behind him. With glittering eyes he sized the man up again. The fellow was as tall as himself and about as heavy. His hairless fists were large and gnarled.

"All right, yuh lowdown crook!" Montana stepped briskly toward the center of the room. "Come an' get yuhr lesson!"

"It'll take a better hombre than yuh t' teach me anything, *amigo!*" the other bellowed. "Yuh got anything t' bet that I won't knock yuhr damn block off?"

Montana was seeing red now.

"I've got two hundred dollars that says yuh won't knock anybody's block off, hombre!" snapped Montana confidently. "Cover it or shut up an' fight—if yuh ain't yaller! I never saw a skunk o' yuhr color that wasn't!"

Leering evilly the man snatched a buckskin poke from his hip pocket and hurled it onto the table beside him.

"There she is, *amigo*!" he jeered.

In his rage the gambler's face was the color of fresh putty now. He came slowly, his gnarled fists upraised, a murderous light in his beady eyes. Suddenly he rushed like a charging grizzly.

That was exactly what Montana had hoped he would do. With a low laugh he stepped nimbly aside and as his antagonist missed him with a whistling right, he planted his own left fist flush on his cheek. It sounded like the sharp snap of a rifle. The blackleg reeled sideways with the imprint of Montana's knuckles showing red on his putty-colored cheek. With a bellow of surprise and rage he wheeled agilely and started circling warily. With his guard up, Montana followed him closely, stepping on the balls of his feet like an experienced prize fighter.

Once more Montana gave a low, taunting laugh. His right flicked out like the head of an angry rattler and buried itself inches deep in his antagonist's midriff. The gambler's thin lips fell open and from them escaped a heavy whistle as his breath hissed from his lungs. He dropped his guard and half doubled up. Quick to follow up any advantage, Montana planted his right squarely against his chin. His head snapped back, straightening him up. He reeled backwards and sat down with a thump that shook the bottles arrayed on shelves behind the bar.

The cowboys yelled insanely for a finishing punch. The more reserved

cattlemen stood tensely silent and watched. Suddenly the gambler planted a wild fist on the side of Montana's head. The buckeroo spun reeling against a table, lost his balance and sat down. With the roar of a bull the other rushed him. Before Montana could get to his feet, the blackleg hurled himself upon him, clutching furiously at his throat. He felt strong fingers sink deep into his neck. He rolled and wrenched, but the gambler hung on, snarling deep in his throat like a cornered wolf.

"I'm gunna kill yuh now, Larkin!" the man snarled fiercely into his face. "Hain't no man livin' what kin call me a blackleg an' live!"

Realizing vaguely that the man intended to do exactly as he threatened, Montana struggled furiously to break free. His eyes were popping and his tortured lungs labored for air. With every bit of strength he could muster, he brought his legs up around the other's back. Since the fellow had started roughing it, he meant to give him a dose of his own medicine. Viciously he drove his rowelled spurs into his back and raked him as he might rake a bucking bronco. Instantly he felt the murderous grip loosen on his throat. The blackleg straightened his back, grunting with pain. As he did so the buckeroo broke his deadly grip, gulped air and struck up at his face.

With a savage wrench he flung the man from him, rolled aside and scrambled to his feet. A shout of encouragement went up from the excited waddies. By now they had come forward until they formed a narrow circle about the fighting men. The two men who had been in the poker game stood aside, watching every movement of the combatants.

The gambler wasted no time in getting to his feet. The back of his shirt was covered with blood where the buckeroo's sharp rowels had raked him. Lowering his head like an infuriated bull he bored in at his accuser. Anxious now to finish the fight, Montana watched for an opening to deliver a knockout blow. He knew that his antagonist could knock him out if he landed a decent blow on his chin. They circled each other like fighting cocks for a few seconds. Then as the gambler flicked forward a fist, the buckeroo brushed it aside and stepped in. His right came up from his belt. Before the other could dodge it, he laid it firmly on the point of his jaw.

That blow had traveled no more than six or eight inches at most. But behind it was the power of a pile driver. It landed with an ugly *thwack.* Instantly the blackleg's head shot back. A glazed look swept into his beady eyes. He fell backward into the arms of one of the two players. Like a wildcat, Montana followed up his advantage. He rushed forward, snatched the fellow by the shirt-front and planted another whistling right into his face.

A murderous snarl came from the battered lips of the gambler. He twisted loose from the buckeroo's grasp and swung wildly. Expertly Montana dodged the blows and began working on the man's soft midriff. Quick as lightning he planted his right there. Once more the gambler half doubled up. A stinging left to his face brought his head up. Again the buckeroo's right flicked out and up. It caught the other flush on the jaw. He staggered back, gasping for

breath. Though half out on his feet, he betrayed no intention of admitting defeat.

Instead he stood glaring murderously at the buckeroo for an instant. Suddenly he bent over and shot a hand into his boot-top. Instantly as he straightened, Montana caught the flash of steel in his hand. His blood ran cold at the glimpse of the long-bladed Bowie in the other's closed fist.

Without warning the man charged at him with blade upraised. Before Montana realized it he was upon him. Just how he managed to dodge the first murderous thrust, he never knew. The blade whistled down past his face, ripping his *reboso* in twain and slashing his shirt-front from throat to waist. Possibly the would-be killer's aim was bad, making him miss his mark. More likely, half-dazed as he was from the battering blows he had received, he had misjudged his distance. At any rate, Montana Larkin missed being laid open like a butchered steer by the barest fraction of an inch.

Realizing clearly that he might be carved up at any instant, he drew back his right leg. As the *buscadero* (knifer) charged at him again with blade upraised, his booted foot shot out. With all the strength in his body behind it, he planted his toe squarely in the gambler's middle. The fellow seemed to freeze in his tracks for an instant. A loud whistle burst from his thin, battered lips. Then as if all strength had fled from his fingers, the Bowie fell to the floor and stuck there, quivering. Quick as a flash the buckeroo kicked it aside and swung a hay-maker clear from the floor.

What his boot might have failed to do, his right fist finished. As it left the floor, aimed at the other's wide chin, the gambler's knees began to sag. The blow caught him as he started falling. His head snapped back. He was lifted clear off the floor to crash down flat on his back yards away.

Amid excited shouts from the men who had wagered on him to win, bets were paid off. Montana took in his belt a notch, snatched up his gun and the money poke the gambler had thrown on the table, and started toward the bar, flanked on either side by the waddies who had won their bets. Left lying in the middle of the floor with only his two friends to look after him, the gambler was quickly revived by a drink from one of their hip flasks. As he climbed groggily to his feet, Montana turned his back to the bar and stood ready to meet any further treachery from the man.

He watched narrowly as one of the gambler's friends snatched up his gun from the floor and jammed it into his holster. The other picked up his hat, dusted it against his leg and placed it on his head. As he looked on, Montana's lips were still white with rage. His right hand hung within an inch of his .45.

But the gambler seemed to have no intentions of doing that now. His battered face was white with fury. He looked toward the bar.

"It's yuhr day, Larkin!" he growled viciously. "But yuh ain't seen the last o' me! Ain't no gent livin' that kin insult a Harper an' keep his guts t'gether! I'm trompin' on yuhr trail from now on!"

Montana Larkin's face became scarlet. All those who had heard Harper's bitter ultimatum were strangely impressed. The buckeroo stared at him, scarcely breathing, fighting to hold back his temper. Suddenly he moved forward away from the bar.

"Right now is as good as any t' finish this, Harper!" he said finally. "Every time I see a rattlesnake, I jes' naturally got t' kill it! But I'm offerin' yuh a chance I wouldn't offer no other rattler! I'm lettin' yuh draw on me here an' now! Go for yuhr gun, Harper, if yuh ain't yaller clear through!"

Suddenly the form of a great hulk of a man, clean-shaven, his wide shoulders almost filling the doorway, pushed open the swinging doors and stepped gingerly into the saloon. He was a man around forty, but his face was young. His black clothing was streaked with red and yellow dust and his big, black Stetson was shoved far back on his great head, revealing a shock of raven-black hair. His sweat-streaked face was hard-set and it was easy to see that he was boiling with cold fury. About his narrow hips hung a pair of black-butted .45's. Inside he paused, took quick stock of the situation and smiled grimly.

Montana Larkin, intently watching Harper and his two friends, did not see him. Nor did he know he was there. What concerned him most at the moment was whether the gambler was going to accept his challenge and settle their differences then and there. For an instant Harper seemed undecided. Then he brushed the back of his hand across his battered mouth and spat.

"This hain't my day, Larkin!" he sneered venomously. "When I'm ready t' settle yuhr hash, yuh'll know whether I'm yaller or not!"

The buckeroo straightened, grinning with cool contempt. As he did so the black-garbed giant stepped forward, his angry eyes glued on Harper.

"Yuh ain't gunna settle nobody's hash, Lafe Harper!" the big man stated with cold finality. "Yuhr days o' shootin' folks in the back air done! Plumb finished, Harper! Stand back, Montany! I got business t' do with this skunk that I'm plumb eager t' git over with pronto!"

Montana looked up at him in total surprise. He blinked incredulously, as if unable to believe his own eyes.

"Senor Satan!" he exploded abruptly. "Where the hell did yuh come from? Shucks, Tate! I thought yuh got drowned in the Rio that time we trailed Gillespie into Mañana Land! Mebbe I'm dreamin'! Sure yuh ain't a ghost, Tate?"

"Yuh ain't dreamin', Montany Larkin, an' I ain't no ghost," said Bull Tate, keeping his cold eyes on Harper. "It's me in the flesh! I'll tell yuh about it when I finish with this scurvied son o' hell!"

Puzzled, the buckeroo glanced at Harper. He had the mean look of a cornered rat now and was backing away inch by inch, his two companions with him. So far, the two men had said nothing in the matter of the crooked deals. But by some instinct Montana felt that they might attempt a shot at him before they got clear of the saloon.

"What yuh got against this Harper, Tate?" Montana inquired abruptly.

"She's a long story, Montany," said the big man frigidly. "Briefly, this Harper galoot took a couple o' shots at me at daylight this mornin' whilst I was rackin' over the mountings t' Pecos t' register my new ranch with the Land Office. Him an' his whole damn tribe o' Harpers musta knowed what I was a-comin' over here for an' he was rackin' along ahead o' me t' beat me t' it. Yuh know, Montany, I done staked out a big ranch over in the Los Dedos Basin an' them Harpers moved in on top o' me, stakin' out every damn foot o' land from ol' Rustlers' Roost clear down t' the South Fork o' the Pecos! They racked up t' my place an' gave me orders t' vamoose, sayin' I was squattin' on their ranch which they'd staked around me arter I'd already drove my line-posts! I been havin' a hell o' a time t' keep from bein' shot every time I stick my nose out o' doors! But I slipped out on 'em last night, thinkin' t' beat 'em by registerin' my claim legal-like with the County Clerk in Pecos. This whelp an' his outfit got wind t' my game somehow an' he racked out ahead o' me t' beat me t' the Land Office or kill me! He laid for me up in the El Pasos an' when I come rackin' along thinkin' I had the jump on 'em, he shot at me, killin' my hoss an' settin' me down!"

With every word he uttered, Bull Tate seemed to grow more furious, if such were possible.

"Harper," he roared suddenly, and his big hands dropped down to his gun-butts. "I'm allowin' yuh jes' sixty seconds t' dig up the deed t' my ranch that yuh got at the Land Office! Yuh dig out that deed an' sign it over t' me plumb pronto! Do yuh hear me, Lafe?"

"I didn't register yuhr ranch, Tate!" Harper rasped viciously. "I didn't have time!"

"Yuh're a low-livered liar!" bellowed the big man. "I jes' come from the County Clerk's office down the street! The girl there said I couldn't file on the Los Dedos claim because yuh'd already registered it an' got a deed in yuhr name! I saw it on the register!"

"All right, Tate!" Harper changed his tactics suddenly. "Supposin' I did? I had a right, didn't I? Yuh staked out plumb in the middle o' the spread my pap an' us boys lined out! Yuh was fixin' t' beat us! Instead, yuh got what was comin' t' yuh! I jes' beat yuh at yuhr own game, Tate! Shore I got the deed an' I'm keepin' it! This gent beside me is Joe Carson from the County Clerk's office. He knows the deed is legal an' yuh cain't hold me up fer it! This other gent is my lawyer! Make yuhr squeel t' him!"

Like a flash his right hand streaked down to his gun-butt. Out of the tails of their eyes, both Montana and Senor Satan saw that lightning-like move. As Harper's crooked fist closed over his gun-butt, Tate flung himself sideways the agility capable of a much younger and more wiry man. Montana ducked and went for his gun. Before he could get in a shot, however, the black barrel of Tate's right hand gun flicked out and up. It roared twice in rapid succession as Harper's six-shooter cleared leather.

Lafe Harper, with his treacherous heart drilled as if by one single shot, spun clear around as though kicked in the side by a horse, and crashed down on his face. Before the echoes of his twin shots began to subside, Tate whirled like a cyclone on the other two men.

"Yuh—from the County Clerk's office!" he bellowed fiercely. "Take that deed out o' Harper's pocket an' cancel it! I staked out that Los Dedos Ranch first an' I'm aimin' t' keep it! I was on that land with my stakes laid six months afore the Harpers staked around me! Yuh're gonna take that deed an' go with me t' yuhr office, an' yuh're gonna re-register it in my name with a record o' my brand! *Sabe amigo?* Now move, *pronto,* or I'll show yuh right now why the greasers down along the border call me *Senor Satan!*"

CHAPTER II

THERE was not a man in the Red Onion Saloon at that moment who was not familiar with gunfights. Nobody there required more than one look at Lafe Harper's still body to see that he was dead. They knew that both of Bull Tate's slugs had entered his heart. But what they did not know were the facts surrounding Tate's claim on the Los Dedos Basin land. Summed up in brief, they were this:

Almost two years before when Montana Larkin and Bull Tate had racked down the Panhandle after Gil Gillespie, they had spent a night in the Los Dedos Basin which comprised some of the most fertile grazing ranges in that section of West Texas. All that land had been under the sole domination of a large band of outlaws of which Gillespie had been a first lieutenant. The territory for many miles surrounding Rustlers' Roost where the desperadoes had their stronghold, had been rustled clean. Recognizing the futility of prosperity under existing conditions, the ranchers who had been in that section had thrown up their hands in despair and quit, abandoning their spreads and leaving them to whatever fate held in store for them.

As the ranchers moved out, the lawless moved in until the territory was so overrun by desperadoes that it was considered unsafe for even a large party of law officers to enter. It had become known as Rustlers' Roost and there the law of the gun was the only law known to exist.

But that was before Montana Larkin and Bull Tate had invaded the stronghold in search for Gillespie who had not only kidnaped Margy Parkins from the Jay Bar Pee, but had also robbed Tate of a large sum of money. Not finding Gillespie or the girl there, they had gotten into a gunfight with the suspicious inhabitants and had burned the town to the ground. As if

that had been the cue for the exodus, the desperadoes had moved out, leaving the Los Dedos Basin and its vicinity safe for ranching.

Heading south for the Mexican border where Gillespie had fled with the girl, Montana had remarked to Tate about the fertility of the Basin and the opportunities it offered now that the outlaw bands were smashed. In reply Tate had declared his desire to give up his infrequent acts of lawlessness and stake out a ranch. This he decided to do as soon as Gillespie had been dealt with. As they rode on southward, Tate's eyes had selected the site for his desired spread.

But neither of them knew then that they were to run into many difficulties before they ever saw the Los Dedos Basin again. In rescuing Margy Parkins from a repulsive fate in a Mexican town, Tate had been gravely wounded. Enraged Mexicans had shot him as they retreated back to the Rio Grande with Margy sandwiched between their horses. Swimming the river he had fallen from his horse and vanished. He had been rescued by a cowboy and turned over, wounded, to Steve Yountis, sheriff, at Laredo. Tate had been a *wanted* man for stage robbing, but Yountis was so enthused over the part he had played in burning Rustlers' Roost that he nursed him back to health and secured him a pardon.

It took him the better part of two years to get back his health, however, so desperately wounded had he been. But Yountis, at his own expense, saw to it that he had the best of attention. At length his wounds healed and he had moved northward again to settle down on that choice range his sharp eyes had picked out in the Los Dedos Basin.

In due time he had arrived at the chosen spot, hauling provisions with him on a string of packhorses. Knowing that the country would soon attract homesteaders, not unlike the Cimarron, he began promptly to stake off his lines and build himself suitable quarters. Working alone, it took him just five months to erect a strong rock ranch house and several large cedar pole corrals. But in doing all this work, he had overlooked the necessity of registering his ranch at the County Seat, which was at Pecos, to protect it. In his eagerness to get going on the straight and narrow, he seemed to have forgotten that the world was full of claim-jumpers.

He had scarcely finished his house and corrals before five hard-eyed men thundered up to him one bright day with an order that he move plumb pronto off *their* ranch. They had him covered before he knew it and resistance just then would have been futile. They were, as he learned to know them, old Kiowa Harper and his four half-breed sons, Gabe, Jess, Rufe and Lafe, the latter being the eldest of the four boys.

The Harpers, according to their own statements, had already staked out five separate ranches, one for each of them, covering many miles in either direction. Moreover, they had declared, he was nesting plumb in the middle of their combination and if he failed to pack up and vamoose within twenty-four hours they would come and move him off the place feet-first. But in

reality, the Harpers had simply blundered on the Los Dedos Basin land. They liked and wanted the Los Dedos Basin Ranch because it comprised the choicest rangeland in the section.

But Bull Tate was not the type to frighten easily. Yet a man with five guns aimed at his belly must either use supreme diplomacy or die with his boots on. Tate had chosen the former and had acted scared. This pleased the Harpers who gave him just twenty-four hours to get out. But when they returned after that time to take possession they found him waiting for them. And in passing months they had failed to catch him off guard until he slipped away to Pecos to obtain a registry of his claim.

Just how they had gotten wind of his plan to register the Los Dedos Ranch, he did not know. Perhaps the presence of Lafe Harper on the same mission had been merely a coincidence. But whatever it was, Lafe Harper was beyond enjoying his ill-gotten ranch now. And while he was not aware of it just then, Montana Larkin was to be drawn into that bloody range war heart and soul in paying his debt of gratitude to the big man.

He watched Joe Carson closely, wondering what connections he had with the unscrupulous Harpers. As he saw it there was no doubt in his mind that he was very friendly with them.

The clerk glared back at Tate rebelliously.

"I can't take anything from Lafe's pockets, hombre!" he said in reply to the big man's demands for the removal of the deed to the Los Dedos Ranch from Harper's pocket. "It ain't legal. We better call the sheriff or the coroner! They're the only ones havin' the right t' go through a dead man's pockets! Besides, I couldn't cancel the deed to the Los Dedos Ranch anyhow because it's registered legal."

"That's right, Carson," interjected the lawyer with a scowl. "The Los Dedos Ranch belongs legally to Lafe Harper. With him dead now, it goes to the rightful heirs, which are his father and brothers. You haven't got a chance, Tate."

Bull Tate muttered something deep in his throat and spat fiercely.

"Is that so, *amigo*?" he bellowed hotly. "Waal—let me tell yuh them damn sneakin' Harpers ain't gunna gyp me out o' my ranch! Get that? Neither are yuh or anybody else! *Carson, I said take that deed out o' Harper's pocket an' come with me t' yuhr office!* We got a leetle registerin' t' do! Now move!"

"Better go careful, Bull," said Montana softly. "I reckon this hombre's right. I reckon I know a little about law myself. Remember I was a ranger an' a deputy sheriff once. If Harper beat yuh to it by havin' the Los Dedos registered in his name an' got a legal deed t' it, yuh're jes 'out o' luck!"

"Montany," growled Tate, ready to explode, "I ain't gunna be gypped by the likes o' them Harpers! I staked off that ranch an' built a house an corrals on it! Right now they's a trail herd o' a thousand cows an' steers bein' druv' up from Del Rio! Where the hell am I gunna put 'em ef not on the Los

Dedos? Them damn Harpers have staked off every damn foot o' ground available! No, by hell! That's my ranch an' I'm gunna keep it!"

He took a quick step closer to Carson and the lawyer, covering them with his six-shooter.

"I ordered yuh t' git that deed, Carson!" he said again. "For a dobie dollar I'd extract yuhr damn liver an' see what makes yuh so all-fired sluggish! Move!"

"All right, Tate!" Carson said suddenly, "I'll get it! But I'm warning yuh that yuh can't get away with this sort o' a deal! It's a plain holdup an' I'll have the sheriff on yuhr tail in less time than it takes t' tell it!"

He bent down quickly. His hands shook as he rolled Harper over on his back and fumbled with the buttons on his shirt-front. He seemed to know just where to find the deed, for his hand disappeared beneath the dead man's shirt and came forth with the blood-soaked document. Tate stepped up as he straightened and snatched it from his hand.

"Now, Carson!" he roared. "Yuh an' me air goin' t' the County Clerk's office! Jes' walk in front o' me an' yuh won't git hurt! Yuhr shyster friend kin jes' keep out o' my way! I don't like his looks. He smells too damn much like a Harper t' suit me! Comin' along, Montany?"

"Mebbe yuh better back down, Tate," said Montana quietly. "After all, yuh're buckin' the law. Much as I hate t' see yuh get gypped, I'd ruther see yuh lose yuhr ranch than get the law on yuhr tail."

"I have had it on my tail for as long as I kin remember, Montany!" growled the big man. "But if the law is what pertects sech stinkin' varmints as the Harpers, I won't have no truck with it! It kin go t' hell an' I'll be my own law! I reckon I ain't skeered o' anything yuh got here now in the way o' law, judgin' from what I've heered tell o' the young squirt o' a sheriff, Burt Kelton, that yuh got servin' out ol' Blaze Clark's unexpired term! O' co'se, Montany, ef yuh've become a shrinkin' vi'let since I knowed yuh last, yuh don't need t' go with me t' the County Clerk's office. I was figgerin' on askin' for yuhr help over in the Los Dedos, but I reckon ef the law's got yuh crawlin' on yuhr belly for it, I reckon I kin handle it all by myself!"

Montana Larkin's face became crimson.

"Nobody has ever had the chance t' say that Montana Larkin ever ran out on a friend, Tate!" he flared. "An' I ain't become no shrinkin' violet, either! Me an' Margy Parkins owe our lives to yuh an' we ain't forgettin'! I'll see yuh through this Harper thing t' a finish an' I reckon I got a dozen hombres ridin' for me at the Jay Bar Pee that'll make the Los Dedos Basin so damned hot for them Harpers that they'll think they're livin' in hell!"

"That's what I was figgerin', Montany," growled Tate. "Now I got t' git goin'. I got t' git this deed changed an' hurry back to the Los Dedos. I wouldn't be surprised t' ride back there an' find that passel o' skunks moved in! Git goin', Carson, an' don't try nothin' foolish!"

Carson started toward the swinging doors with Tate directly behind him. Montana caught the eye of one of the bartenders and nodded.

"When Parkins comes here for me, Pete," he said, "tell him I'll be back in two shakes t' drive him t' the ranch!"

They went out promptly, leaving Harper's lawyer staring sullenly after them. He went presently to the bar, gulped a drink and stomped out of the saloon. Once outside he paused to glance down the street toward the red brick courthouse a block away. Half way there and walking swiftly with Carson in the lead, were Tate and Montana. He gave them a nasty look and vaulted onto his horse that stood at the hitchrack and rode away in the opposite direction to take the South Trail over the El Pasos to the Los Dedos Basin.

Reaching the courthouse, Tate ordered Carson inside. They went along a narrow hall until they came to the County Clerk's office. Nervously Carson opened the door and would have slammed it shut in their faces had not Tate been expecting such a move. He jammed his foot against it.

"Why don't yuh git onto yuhrself, Carson!" he growled in an admonishing tone. "Looks t' me like yuh're rackin' down the wrong trail. Yuh're either a damn close friend o' the Harpers or they bought yuh off t' play ball with 'em in stealin' other folks' homesteads! Where's yuhr boss, the County Clerk?"

"He's out o' town!" grumbled Carson. "I'm boss here until he gets back!"

"Like hell yuh are!" retorted Tate promptly. "Yuhre takin' orders from me an' I'm orderin' yuh t' change this deed t' my name an' clear yuh records o' any connection between the Harpers an' the Los Dedos!"

Seeing the gun in Tate's gnarled fist, the girl in the office stifled a little cry of fear and looked anxiously at Carson. She was scarcely more than eighteen or nineteen, but one look at her was enough to show that she was a square peg in a round hole.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Is it a holdup?"

"No, maam," said Tate quietly. "It ain't no holdup, unless this jasper, Carson, is doin' the job! I reckon yuh ain't got no call t' be afraid. We ain't gunna hurt yuh. Stay here ef yuh want."

She looked back at Carson, bewildered. His eyes narrowed as he jerked his head toward the door.

"Yuh wait in the sheriff's office across the hall, Miss Cole," he said firmly. "I'll call yuh when I need yuh."

Tate saw him wink craftily at her, and laughed.

"I see through that dodge, Carson!" he remonstrated. "Thinkin' o' bringin' the sheriff down on me, eh? Yuh stay here, maam. I want t' ask yuh a few questions."

"As you wish," she said meekly.

"What connection has this Carson got with Lafe Harper who was here today t' register a claim t' the Los Dedos Ranch?" Tate inquired.

"I don't know what you mean," she replied, looking at Carson, bewildered.

"I mean, has any o' the Harpers been here afore today?" the big man elucidated.

"I cannot say," the girl replied. "Perhaps Mr. Carson can explain that better, for I understand he and Lafe Harper are cousins."

"Cousins, eh?" Tate rumbled, grinning suspiciously at the clerk. He saw Carson stare daggers at the girl. "So that's the hook-up between yuh an' that Harper tribe, Carson? Yuh shore yuh didn't know all the time that the Harpers was fixin' t' jump my ranch after I'd put in the improvements?"

"I don't know anything, *amigo*!" leered Carson coldly.

"No?" the ex-outlaw grunted. "Waal—mebbe Miss Cole does. I'm aimin' t' find out. They's a few things about registerin' property that I learned from my old man who was a land-baron up in Colorady when I was a younker. Now, maam," he turned once more to the girl. "I want yuh t' answer another question fer me."

"You keep yuhr mouth shut, Miss Cole!" Carson flung at her suddenly. "Yuh've talked too much already. Another word out o' yuh, an' yuh're fired!"

"Don't pay no 'tention t' him, maam," urged Tate. "Ef he fires yuh, I'll jes' extract his liver an' see what makes him so damn mean. Hear that, Carson? I got a hunch I'm gunna do a lot o' visitin' here after my ranch deed is settled, an' if Miss Cole ain't here when I come, it's gunna be jes' too damn bad fer yuh! Now, maam, I want yuh t' tell me if the Los Dedos has ever been filed on afore an' if it's government land or county land? Do yuh know?"

"It has never before been claimed," the girl said hesitantly. "It is government land."

"Bueno!" Tate grunted, keeping a weather eye on the clerk. "That's what I figgered. Now, how long has a homesteader got t' live on government land afore he kin get a clear deed? Do yuh know?"

"Of course—" Miss Cole began, looking uneasily at Carson.

"Yuh'll get yuhrself in a heap o' trouble!" growled Carson.

"Shut up, Carson!" ordered Tate. "Go ahead, Miss Cole! Don't mind him a-tall! Go ahead an' tell me how long a jasper's got t' live on a homestead claim afore he kin git a clear deed."

"A settler on government land," the girl began again, "must reside on his claim for six months each year for a period of three years. He must put in certain improvements, like the building of suitable living quarters, the clearing of certain acreage and the developing of water before he can obtain a clear deed. Claims must be registered with the Department of the Interior and no deed is legal until it has received the signature of the Chief Clerk of the Department."

"That's one o' the things my old man taught me, maam," said Tate graciously. "Now, Carson, what I want t' know from yuh, is this! How come yuh kin hand out a clear deed t' Lafe Harper afore the three years' time has expired? He come here this mornin' an' got this clear deed without so much as battin' an eye! How come?"

"How do yuh know he wasn't livin' in the Los Dedos for three years?" Carson snapped.

"Because he wasn't livin' there when I staked out my homestead!" Tate roared back. "The skunk never showed up ontil I had put in all the improvements an' yuh know it!"

Tate jammed his six-shooter in his waist and spread out the spurious deed stained with Harper's own life's blood. He held it up for Miss Cole to scrutinize. She gasped at the sight of the blood stains which were dry now.

"Miss Cole," he said, "have yuh ever seen a deed that has been cleared through the Department o' the Interior in Washington?"

"Of course," she replied.

"*Bueno,* maam," said Tate jubilantly. "But have yuh never seen a clear deed that didn't have an official government stamp on it?"

"No, I never have," she said.

"Nor will yuh ever!" thundered Tate at the clerk. "This *clear* deed Carson gave t' Lafe Harper ain't got no stamp on it because it never seen Washington! This dirty skunk, Carson, jes' wrote it up an' handed it t' him. Take a good look at it, maam!"

She took the document in her hands, careful not to touch any of the stains and scrutinized it carefully. Carson stood behind his desk, scowling like a thundercloud. Montana grinned at him. Suddenly the girl reached to her own desk and slipped a document from a number of legal deeds held together by a rubber band. Spreading it out, she compared the signatures on the two documents. Watching her carefully, Carson's eyes blazed murder. He was caught in a trap and knew it, for he had not only framed a fake deed in Lafe Harper's favor, but had forged the signature of the Chief Clerk to it as well! Why? Because he and the Harpers were blood relations? Hardly! It was a shady deal in which he expected to get a good slice of the profits when the Harpers made a quick sale of the Los Dedos to some unsuspecting rancher! And the illegal disposal of the valuable Los Dedos before the land was proved up, was not all.

The Harpers had staked out every foot of land available in the Basin! For every square foot of that land, Joe Carson was ready to issue a faked deed that he might realize on the fraudulent sale! As a matter of fact, many such deeds had already been written in favor of the Harpers and with homesteaders and ranchers beginning to flock into the Los Dedos and Longhorn countries, a sure-fire clean up seemed but a matter of a few months.

"The signature on this Harper document," said Miss Cole suddenly, much to Carson's discomfiture, "is a very poor forgery! There can be no mistake about that, gentlemen. Somebody has forged the signature of the Chief Clerk to this deed!"

"Let me see it, Miss Cole!" Carson demanded. Before Tate or Montana could stop him, the clerk snatched up the spurious document and tore it to

bits. The girl was the only one who seemed concerned with its destruction. Tate laughed.

"You should not have destroyed that deed, Mr. Carson," she admonished. "It is evidence of fraud going on in this office!"

"Yuh 'tend t' yuhr own business!" snapped Carson. "No use in keepin' the deed when it ain't legal nohow! Yuh win this time, Tate, but don't forget that the Los Dedos ain't yuhrs yet!"

"I'd be mighty damn keerful if I was yuh, Carson!" warned Tate quietly. "Ef I remember right, they's a law for handlin' sech forgers as yuh! I got a hunch yuh an' them Harpers are schemin' t' defraud folks by issuin' fake deeds so yuh kin sell government land without provin' up on it! Destroyin' that deed jes' about proves yuh're crooked, because it was damnin' evidence against yuh! Don't yuh think so, Montany?"

"It would have hung him, Bull!" replied Montana. "No doubt about it!"

"Yuh said a fork-full, son!" grinned Tate, scowling at Carson. "Hombre," he added. "I don't reckon I kin trust yuh t' handle the registry o' the Los Dedos claim in *my* name, so I'm gunna ask Miss Cole if she'll do it for me. I reckon she's shootin' square in this office, so yuh take yuhrself out o' here plumb pronto afore I git mad enough t' pull out yuhr spotted liver an' look it over! Now git! Vamoose!"

The clerk, scared almost to the point of chattering teeth, lost no time in getting out of the office. But as he went through the door, he paused and looked back over his shoulder.

"Yuh jaspers'll go t' jail for this shake-down!" he said earnestly. "It's highway robbery!"

Tate's big six-shooter leaped from his belt and roared, splintering the door-frame close to Carson's head. The clerk ducked and raced away. They heard the thud of his feet as he tore down the hall. Tate laughed boisterously.

"I should have shot that skunk, Montany!" he said, sobering. "Yuh keep an eye on that door. If he sticks his snout in here again, blow it off!"

Miss Cole, frightened also after the sudden shooting, began entering a new description of the Los Dedos Ranch into the records. Her small, white hand trembled as she wrote with pen and ink. Tate watched her, smiling grimly, and fell hard. For the first time in his life, he told himself silently, he had found a girl that he really liked. She was slender, black-haired, dark-eyed and straight-featured, and she drew his eyes as they had never been drawn before to any girl.

She was far from the clinging vine type, yet she was altogether feminine. The curve of her red lips betrayed character and independence. She wore a striking calico dress with a large bow tied in the back. Immaculate in every respect, she might have fitted in any man's office in the East. Intelligent, with a capacity for thinking for herself, she was like a rose in a bed of thorns.

"This must seem like a terrible country to yuh, maam," said Tate as she handed him a slip of paper proclaiming his right to the Los Dedos. "I'm

willin' t' gamble that even the honeysuckle blossoms look like horned toads when yuh see 'em! Yuh're from——?"

"New York City, Mr. Tate," she volunteered promptly, getting control of her jumpy nerves. "I've been in Pecos just one month today."

She smiled sweetly, deftly shoved back a wind-blown curl and dropped her eyes.

"I really like the West despite its shootings and roughness, Mr. Tate," she said wistfully. "Pecos is a fascinating community with its carefree cowboys and their prancing horses. The men seem so strong and self-reliant, and the women, well, they just can't seem to do enough for me. I wish I could remain here forever and just—just live!"

"Why don't yuh, maam?" put in Montana quizzically.

"Because I've got to go on," she replied with a shrug. "You see, I came West in search of my brother. We were orphans and I was living with an aunt who was anything but kind to us. My brother came to Texas. Frankly, he got into some trouble back in New York and had to leave to escape arrest. Of course, he did not rob the man who put the police after him. I did not hear from him for a long time until finally he wrote to me from Laredo, saying he was working for a man named Brett."

"Brett—Marco Brett, maam?" inquired Montana with renewed interest.

"Yes, that was his name," said the girl. "He was a dealer in horses and cattle. But when I arrived in Laredo, I learned that Mr. Brett was out of town and Jimmy, my brother, was with him. Being out of funds, I had to get work, so I obtained a position in a dry goods store in Laredo and settled down to await Jimmy's return. That was almost two years ago. But I waited a long time and neither Jimmy nor Mr. Brett returned. Then I learned that Brett had been killed at a town called Longhorn, but nobody knew what had happened to Jimmy. I was told I might find him around Pecos. So I came here searching for him. Nobody seems to have known anyone by the name of Jimmy Cole."

Tate and Montana exchanged quick glances. The buckeroo frowned.

"Did anybody ever tell yuh what happened t' Longhorn, maam?" he asked quietly.

"Yes," she replied. "I was told that Longhorn had been burned to the ground and that it no longer exists."

"An' yuh say yuhr brother went there with Brett nigh onto two years ago?" the buckeroo continued.

"That's what I learned at Brett's corrals when I arrived at Laredo," the girl responded readily.

"Didn't anybody ever tell yuh what sort o' a hombre this Brett was, maam?" quizzed Montana.

"Only that he was a big stock dealer," she replied promptly.

"Supposin'," said Montana, "that I should tell yuh that Brett was one o'

the worst rustlers an' killers that ever hit Texas, an' that he was the boss o' Longhorn, an outlaw town that had nothing in it but a gang o' outlaws?"

The girl caught her breath and gasped.

"You mean that Jimmy—my brother—was a member of that gang?" she demanded incredulously.

"I never heard o' anyone *workin' for* Marco Brett, maam," said Montana quietly. "Moreover, I don't want t' cause yuh no grief, but I wouldn't be at all surprised if yuhr brother never got out o' Longhorn when it was burned down. Folks know the town as Rustlers' Roost hereabouts."

"What makes you say that?" she demanded, aghast.

"I reckon I know, maam," he said quietly, "because Tate an' me are the hombres that burned Rustlers' Roost out. This Brett hombre yuhr brother was—er—workin' for, killed my father up in Montana. I ran into him at the Roost an', well, had t' do t' him what any other man'd do t' a jasper who'd shot his dad in the back! We were there when Brett's wagon train pulled into town with a load o' likker an' grub for his men holed up at the Roost. Whilst I don't claim t' know what happened t' yuhr brother, maam, I reckon it ain't hard t' guess."

"Oh!" the girl gasped. "How could he—how could he have associated himself with that kind of people after promising me to go straight?"

They were silent for a moment. Tears began welling suddenly in the girl's eyes and she fought gamely to hold them back. Tate spoke abruptly.

"I ran inta a younker by the name o' Buck Cole once who was a jerk-line man for Brett, maam," he said gravely, turning to Montana. "Remember that hombre, Montany," he added, "that started shootin' at us from the upper window o' Brett's hangout in the ol' Longhorn co'thouse that night?"

"I shore do," said the buckeroo. "He came dang near layin' me out full length, but his shootin' was either bad or he didn't know much about usin' a rifle."

"That was Buck Cole, Montany," vouchsafed the ex-outlaw. "I saw his face that night in the light o' the flames from the burnin' town. He was jes' a younker, about beginnin' t' sprout a man-size set o' whiskers. *Remember how he lost his balance an' fell out o' the window?*"

Montana looked at him curiously for an instant. Tate frowned as if gesturing for him to keep silent in the true manner in which Buck Cole had come to a sudden end. Montana caught the meaning instantly and decided that it was not for him to tell this girl that, if Buck Cole was her brother, he had been knocked out of that window by a slug from Tate's own carbine.

"Yeah, I remember, Tate," he said, watching the girl's face. It was white now and her lips were colorless. "Broke the poor hombre's neck. But mebbe this Buck Cole wasn't Miss Cole's brother."

She bit her colorless lips fiercely to hold back her tears. But they came suddenly in a flood and she sat down in a chair, weeping.

"My brother was known as Buck Cole in Laredo," she sobbed, "and I think

I can see through your assertion that he fell from the window. You had to kill him to save yourselves! I know it—I feel it! But if he was running with an outlaw gang as you say, then it is best that he is dead rather than continue his career of crime. I bear you no malice, for you do not seem like men who would kill unless it was to save your own lives!"

"Thank yuh, maam," said Tate humbly. "Now buck up, maam. Life out here ain't what it is where yuh hail from. Out here it's nip'n tuck with every jasper fer hisself, an' folks jes' ain't got time t' spare a-grievin' over their dead. Yuh got lots o' savvy in yuh, maam, an' they ain't nothin' folks out here won't do fer yuhr kind as long as yuh keep yuhr head high an' yuhr lips stiff. Ain't that right, Montany?"

"She shore is, Tate. I was jes' wonderin' if Miss Cole has met up yet with Margy Parkins. There's a gal t' pattern after, maam!"

"I'd like to meet her," said the girl who, in her line of work, had not yet encountered the womenfolk from the ranches outlying Pecos. "I've already heard of her and once I get acquainted with the younger set, I won't feel so lonesome."

"Then yuh're figgerin' on stayin' here, maam?" Tate asked, his eyes brightening like those of a youngster at the prospect of a new gun.

"If Mr. Carson does not have me fired," she said, drying her tears, "I will make my home here, Mr. Tate."

"Don't go t' worryin' none about that skunk firin' yuh, maam," Tate growled. "I'll wring his crooked neck if he does. Do yuh mind if I ask yuh t' call me jes' plain Jack, maam? I cain't get used t' folks *misterin'* me."

"I should be pleased to," she smiled, revealing her white teeth. "I noticed that you signed your name on the register as P. Jack Tate. What does the *P* stand for?"

Bull Tate's leathery face reddened instantly and a haunted look crept into his eyes.

"I warn't figgerin' on ever lettin' that out, maam," he stammered. "It was sech a' all-fired curse on me up in Colorady that I had t' leave home t' save my face! But if yuh an' Montany'll keep it a secret down here, I'll tell yuh what it means."

"Yuh can trust me, Bull," said Montana curiously.

"Me too," the girl agreed.

"Waal, then," began Tate reluctantly. "The *P* stands for *Pearl*! My name is Pearl Jack Tate, which-all is one helluva brand t' put on a jasper like me!"

"Pearl?" Montana burst loose like a bawling steer. "*Pearl?* For Gawd's sake, Tate, how come yuh quit skirts an' took t' pants?"

Bull Tate's face became a deeper shade of red. He looked at the girl and found her struggling hard to keep from laughing. Suddenly she could hold it back no longer and had to let go. It was a bright, musical laugh and, angry as he was at the buckeroo for riding him, he found himself unable to get mad at her.

"Shucks," he said finally, "what's a name, anyhow?"

"You are right," commented Miss Cole, realizing suddenly that she was laughing in the face of news of her brother's death. But somehow she felt lighter at heart now, strangely free—free to come and go as she pleased without forever worrying and fretting over his whereabouts and what he was doing. "It's not the name that counts," she added. "It's the man or woman who owns it! I had an uncle once whose name was *Marie*. He was named after a popular maiden aunt. I came near having a man's name myself, but they decided to call me *Georgia* instead of George!"

"Now that's a right purty brand, maam," said Tate. "Georgia Cole, eh? That jes' seems t' fit yuh—a nice name for a nicer gal!"

"Next thing yuh'll be writin' poetry, Tate," said Montana, frowning.

"Yeah?" Tate grinned at him facetiously.

"Yeah," said Montana, glancing hallward, "an' yuh'll be both in love an' in jail at the same time if yuh don't get out o' here, Tate! Sounds like a whole army comin' down the hall. I reckon that'll be the sheriff an' yuhr friend, Carson, with the whole town on their heels!"

CHAPTER III

THE door to the County Clerk's office was shoved open with sudden violence. Into the room stepped a tall, thin-faced man whose vices and dissipations made him look ten years older than he really was. On his thin, pointed chin was a two-day growth of black whiskers, the only hair on his entire face that boasted the need of a razor. Displayed prominently on his loose vest was a sheriff's badge.

Sheriff Burt Kelton, who had more than once disgraced the good name of his father, the respected and well-liked Judge Kelton who presided over the District Court, took an ungainly step forward. It was plain to be seen that he was in an ugly mood, for there was a challenging smirk on his red lips; a belligerent scowl on his sallow face.

For years the citizens of Pecos had watched the steady degradation of Burt Kelton and they had never ceased speculating on where he was most likely to wind up. Out of sheer regard for the kindly old Judge Kelton, many opportunities had been made and offered to his wayward son as an inducement for him to go straight, even to his appointment by Honest Blaze Clark as chief deputy. But young Kelton had shown no more regard for his oath than any members of the wild bunch with which he associated might have shown for an unbranded heifer. For the sake of his disgusted and helpless old parent,

folks had simply overlooked the failings of his son and when Blaze Clark got in the way of a rustler's slug meant to murder him, they went a step further in their efforts to put him on the right trail. But with his appointment to serve out Sheriff Blaze's unexpired term of office, he had gone completely berserk with his new-found authority.

Gambling was one of Sheriff Burt Kelton's favorite indoor sports. In his opinion the shuffling of the pasteboards and the drinking of hard liquor was as close to Paradise as any man could get. As a result, he awoke one day to find himself so deep in debt to the owner of the *Santos Rojos,* one hard character by the name of Taos Dawson, that he was threatened with exposure if he failed to pay up. But exposure was not necessary. Everybody in Pecos knew and wondered how long he would continue to disgrace the fine man who had sired him. But what folks did not know, was that Sheriff Burt Kelton, to satisfy his debt, had become the tool of Taos Dawson and had permitted him to open up a number of other saloons and red-light dens without fear of prosecution. Before he knew it he found himself, legally speaking, an accessory after the crimes of prostitution, robbery, murder and everything else he had sworn to suppress with the taking of his oath as sheriff.

Neither Montana Larkin nor Bull Tate needed to debate very long on the question of whose side he was on, the law's side, or Joe Carson's. They sensed trouble and were prepared for it.

"I don't allow nobody t' git sassy with me, Larkin!" Kelton snarled at him with quick anger. "I'm the sheriff o' this county an' I'm askin' yuh an' yuhr friend what kind o' a shake-down yuh're pullin' on Carson here?"

"What business is it o' yuhr'n, Burt?" the buckeroo barked almost in his face. "Don't tell me yuh're rackin' along the same trail with this crooked landshark o' a Carson! I thought yuhr business was over at the *Santos Rojos* an' the rest o' them dens?"

"Since when have yuh been runnin' this office an' mine, Larkin?" the sheriff blazed, dropping his hands down to the pair of six-guns that hung slantwise on his narrow hips. "I been watchin' yuh since yuh come t' Pecos an' I don't mind sayin' that I ain't satisfied with what I've seen."

"I reckon yuh've showed that more'n once, Burt," frowned Montana patiently. "A blind man could see that yuh hate me. An' I know why, Burt! Yuh've had yuhr dirty eyes on Margy Parkins for a long time! Yuh insulted her by tryin' t' speak t' her last time she was in town! I'm warnin' yuh right now, Burt, that the next time the likes o' yuh stop her on the street or anywhere else, I'll come after yuh a-foggin'—an' *I mean foggin',* Burt! Now, gettin' down t' cases. Yuh wanted t' know what was goin' on here. Well, I'll tell yuh plumb an' plain. My friend, Tate, staked out a ranch over in the Los Dedos Basin an' this shyster, Carson, tried t' gyp him out o' it by issuin' a forged an' fake deed t' Lafe Harper."

"That's a lie, Burt!" Carson growled suddenly. "It's jes' part o' their scheme t' shake me down!"

Montana took one quick step forward, caught Carson by the coat-front and shook him like a cat shaking a rat.

"Carson!" he said in a voice that was cold and dangerous. "If yuh say that again, I'll turn yuh over my knee an' spank yuh with yuhr own gun!"

He shook the crooked land shark until his teeth clattered, then let him go. Carson was so scared that his knees sagged weakly.

"As I was sayin', Kelton," the buckeroo looked back at the sheriff who had made no move to intervene. "It looks like this land-shark, Carson, is in cahoots with his cousins, the Harpers, t' sell government land on faked deeds. *Yuh* don't happen t' *know* o' any such deals, do yuh, Burt?"

Burt Kelton's fists closed over his gun-butts and for an instant the silence in the office was oppressive.

"Get yuh're paws away from them guns, Burt!" the buckeroo snapped at him impressively.

Drunk or sober, Sheriff Burt Kelton had always harbored a deep-rooted fear of Montana Larkin, for he knew his reputation as a one-time deputy sheriff over in Crockett County and of the part he had played in the burning of Rustlers' Roost.

Hesitantly the officer's hands dropped away from his guns. He was whipped by the frigid, inviting stare of the buckeroo whom he knew had few equals in Pecos for gun-drawing and intestinal fortitude.

"Larkin," he almost shouted as if to impress the men behind him with his ferocity, "yuh've been a thorn in my side ever since yuh hit Pecos! I'm plumb tired o' yuh, Larkin, an' I hate yuhr guts! I'm a-tellin' yuh right now, I'm givin' yuh jes' thirty minutes for yuh an' yuhr friend t' git out o' Pecos! I'm givin' yuh forty-eight hours for yuh both t' git clear out o' Pecos County! If yuh ain't out by then, I'm a-comin' after yuh with hombres that'll make yuh git! Is that plain, *amigos*?"

Both Montana and Tate laughed outright at that.

"An' who, Mister Sheriff," boomed Tate derisively, "are the hombres yuh're gonna git t' do the chasin'?"

"Yuh're a couple o' gunmen," Kelton stated resolutely, "an' I'm gonna fight fire with fire! I'm gonna swear in the hardest hombres I kin find in Pecos for my deputies, an' amongst 'em is gonna be Taos Dawson! Yuh asked for trouble, now yuh're gonna git it! So damned much yuh'll think hell busted loose around yuh! As for yuh, Tate——"

"Keerful o' yuhr tongue, Kelton!" warned the big man coldly. "They's a lady present!"

"As for yuh, Tate," Kelton went on, "yuh better stay away from the Los Dedos Basin! Carson has already told me about yuh fixin' t' steal that land from the Harpers! I know them Harpers right well an' they're decent folks! Now git goin' an' don't stop ontil yuh're plumb out o' Pecos County! Taos an' me'll start lookin' for yuh plumb pronto!"

"Taos Dawson, eh?" Tate jeered. "So that's the kind o' trash yuh're runnin'

with, eh, Kelton? Burt, jes' t' make it plumb interestin', jes' tell Taos that it'll be *Senor Satan* he'll be a-trailin'! An' ef yuh happen t' swear in another jasper that I know right pussonal, *the Durango Kid,* yuh might also tell him the same! So yuh know the Kid also, eh?"

"I know the Durango Kid!" he responded promptly. "He'll be on yuhr trail with Taos an' me! Git goin'! That's my last warnin'!"

It was apparent to both Montana and Tate that Kelton had not yet learned of the killing of Lafe Harper in the Red Onion. If he was aware of it, he betrayed no sign of the fact. Montana reasoned that in his excitement Carson had forgotten to tell him. But after having delivered his ultimatum he turned on his heels and stalked irregularly back into the corridor where with Carson and the others at his side, he stood waiting for their exit.

Montana and his big companion took their time. Tate stepped up to the girl who gave a sigh of relief.

"The sheriff is very angry with you," she said, rising to her feet. "Hadn't you better go as he ordered?"

"Nobody takes that jasper seriously, maam," he said indifferently. "I heard all about him an' he's the laughin' stock o' West Texas! As for goin', I got t' slope anyhow, but I'll be comin' back into Pecos pronto an' plumb often. Yuh wouldn't mind if I—er—sort o' took a look in here then t' see that yuh're all right?"

"Of course not," she told him, her eyes bright with warm interest. "I shall be very glad to see you—anytime. If you do not find me here, I'll be at Mrs. Ashley's home up near the schoolhouse. I have been living there since I came to Pecos."

"Bueno, chiquita!" he said eagerly. "I didn't think a gal like yuh'd have any truck with a hard case like me, Georgie, but I ain't so durn bad!"

"Nor so hard that you can't be tamed, Senor Satan!" she said frivolously.

"Come on, Tate," said Montana dryly. "Ol' Jay Bar Parkins'll be out lookin' for me anytime now."

And so he was, but not exactly in the flesh. He sent Red Abbott, a Jay Bar wrangler after him. Red had just made a flying trip into Pecos with news that made the rancher hit the ceiling on the first bounce. Excitedly Red rushed into the courthouse and down the hall toward the County Clerk's office. He saw Kelton and his companions instantly and pulled up, puffing from the exertion of running from the street to the office.

The door was open and as the wrangler started for it, Montana emerged into the hall, Tate following close behind.

Watching Kelton and his friends out of the tail of his eyes, the buckeroo looked quizzically at the wrangler.

"What's up, Red?" he demanded anxiously. "Parkins sick, hurt or jes' sore because I ain't there t' play nursemaid t' him?"

"All three, Montana!" panted Red, casting furtive glances at the scowling

features of the sheriff. "He's seein' green right now! Wants yuh back at the Red Onion pronto t' drive him back t' the ranch!"

"What's his hurry?" grumbled Montana curtly.

"Are yuh askin' me, amigo?" Red gestured wildly. "Yuh better come! Yuh know that passel o' blooded stock we been rangin' up back o' Mustang Mesa?"

"Shore!" growled the buckeroo. "What o' it?"

"Waal—," Red breathed hard. "Some long-eared sons o' red-eyed *orejanas* done rustled fifty head o' them nags mebbe two-three nights ago! We jes' found it out this mo'nin' an' I racked down t' tell the Ol' Man!"

"Fifty head o' blooded Morgan stock!" Montana groaned, looking fiercely at Tate. "Now who the hell is takin' up where them damn Rustlers' Roosters have left off?"

Tate shrugged his wide shoulders and looked at Kelton.

Kelton looked daggers at him, but said nothing. He turned to the wrangler.

"How do yuh know they was rustled two-three nights ago, Abbott?" he asked.

Red spat disgustedly.

"Didn't yuh ever try t' read sign afore, Burt?" he growled. "Co'se yuh wouldn't have no time fer that, what with all loafin' yuh been doin' on the job!"

"Purtty sassy, ain't yuh, *amigo*?" Kelton hissed from between clenched teeth. He was burning up inside with hurt pride and resentment, but lacked the desire—or courage—to put his fury into action.

"No more'n ordin'ry, Burt," countered Red sourly.

"Waal, don't gimme no more o' yuhr lip," growled Kelton ominously. "You damn Jay Bar hombres are gittin' too damn sassy, the whole caboodle o' yuh! Now gimme the lowdown on this rustlin'! I'll rack out thataway when I git a chance an' see what's t' be done about it!"

"Yuh better go roll yuhr hoop, Burt!" interjected Montana. "We ain't got time t' wait ontil yuh make up yuhr mind t' do somethin' about it! We're goin' after them rustlers ourselves an' if yuh get in the way, why, we'll jes' ride plumb over yuh! Now g'wan back t' the *Santos Rojos* an' ketch up on yuhr gamblin' an' boozin'! If we ketch them hoss thieves, we'll bring 'em in so yuh can hang 'em!"

Without another word they went swiftly down the corridor and emerged onto the street. Red promptly gathered up his reins, vaulted into his saddle and galloped back to the Red Onion to report to his boss. Montana and Tate hurried on foot after him, with the buckeroo casting frequent, anxious glances over his shoulder to keep tab on Kelton.

"That Kelton hombre shore hates yuh, Montany," Tate grunted as they walked toward the Red Onion.

"Yuh can guess why, can't yuh?" replied the buckeroo earnestly.

"Margy Parkins?"

"Yuh said it, Tate!" Montana stated. "He's been sweet on her for a long time and is sore because she won't have no truck with him. He thinks, I reckon, with me out o' the way, he'd have a chance."

"I was kinda expectin' t' find yuh married t' Margy when I got back here, Montany," said Tate quietly, pulling the brim of his hat down to shade his eyes against a west-slanting sun.

"We're engaged, Tate," Montana volunteered. "Been thataway since yuh an' me rescued her from Mexico. But she won't marry me ontil I've proved t' her that I ain't gonna go saddle-bummin' no more. She gave me two years t' prove t' her that I mean business."

"Smart filly, Margy," commented Tate. "I don't blame her a damn bit. Put yuhself in a gal's place. She wouldn't want t' bear yuh any kids an' have yuh go off leavin' her stuck! But ain't that two years about up now?"

"In a couple o' months," said Montana with anticipation. "I reckon we'll be gettin' hitched in June. I got every durn day marked off on a' almanac at the ranch—jes' two years t' the day!"

"Now speakin' o' wimmen, Montany," Tate enthused. "That Georgie Cole is *some* gal! I'm aimin' t' see a lot o' her, son. Ain't she got *some* eyes?"

"Don't forget that our conscientious sheriff has ordered yuh out o' Pecos County!" Montana reminded him with a wry grin.

"That's right, he did!" Tate grunted, scowling. "I plumb fergot about it, Montany. But the pore misguided gent fergot t' say anything about comin' back."

"What about that Taos Dawson hombre an' that Durango Kid gent?" Montana said grimly.

Tate's face grew cloudier.

"Bad hombres, Montany," he said. "Faster'n hell with guns. But if Kelton swore in a hundred like 'em, they couldn't scare me out o' the Los Dedos Basin! I met both o' them jaspers afore. Dawson an' me had a run-in over in New Mexico three-four years ago. He was runnin' a crooked poker game in a saloon there an' I called him. I planted a pair o' slugs in him, one in the hand an' the other in his middle somewhere. But he didn't die. He's too damn o'nery t' die. Anyhow, I heard later that I'd shot two fingers off'n his gun-hand an' he was swearin' up an' down the Canadian River t' kill me on sight. As for that Durango Kid, waal, he's about as bad a *orejana* as I ever run acrosst. Had a run-in with him, also, up in Colorady afore I left home. I bashed him over the haid with my gun-butt for insultin' my sister up thataway. I reckon he ain't ever got over it, for I heard it said that he had a slug with my name writ on it in his six-gun. Both him an' Dawson'd as soon shoot a gent in the back as look at him. Waal, here's the Red Onion!"

They went swiftly onto the covered porch of the saloon, pushed open the swinging doors and entered to find Jim Parkins luridly and explosively describing to a fascinated audience all the known breed of horse thieves and their black-hearted ancestry. He was a heavy-set man well in advance in

years, white-haired, bristly-jawed and with plenty of vitality still left in his old carcass.

As far as folks knew, he had started swearing one day fifty years before when a Comanche, resentful of his pioneering the Jay Bar Pee, had planted a poisoned war arrow in his left leg, and had never let up. The poison on the deadly arrow had gradually caused the muscles in his leg to shrivel and draw tight, finally making it too stiff for him to set a horse. In consequence, he was forced to do all his sight-seeing from a buckboard. Needless to say this irked him more than anything else, for if there was one thing Jim Parkins had ever loved, it was to sit a spirited horse. For a good many years now that had been impossible, and when he walked, he did so with the aid of a heavy, manzanita-pole cane knobbed with a chunk of silver that could have felled a steer.

Jim Parkins was approaching seventy. He had but two interests in life—his daughter Margy and the raising of the finest Morgans in the country. He had married late in life and when his wife died three years afterward she had left him with an infant daughter to care for. But in raising Margy, he had done a very commendable job. She had grown up endowed with his own dynamic energy and generosity, and was as frisky as any of the young thoroughbred fillies bearing his brand. Straight as a cedar pole and fair as the wild honeysuckle blossoms that in spring carpeted the rugged slopes of the El Pasos, she was as famous for her looks and charm as his Morgans were for their strength and dependability.

"Yessuh, gents!" he was thundering in his pleasant Louisiana drawl as Montana and Tate breezed into the saloon. "It's gettin' so in this damn country that the rustlers have got yuhr unborn stock marked for a runnin' iron even afore its foaled! Now why in the blue streak hell ain't that lop-eared son o' Satan, Montana Larkin, heah t' drive me back t' the Jay Bar?"

"He's here now, boss," spoke up Red Abbott, rolling a smoke with nervous hands.

Parkins looked up as Montana approached.

"Montany!" he roared with renewed fury. "How many times have I warned yuh t' stay out o' trouble? Every damn time I turn my damn back, yuh're gittin' into a fight or a shootin' scrape! I have wasted damn near a half a day a-waitin' on yuh!"

"Half a day, Jim?" grinned Montana. "Why, yuh ol' rustler, I ain't been away from the Red Onion for more'n twenty minutes!"

Sputtering and fuming under his foreman's caustic rebuff, Parkins tossed off a quick drink. Montana took the opportunity to see if Lafe Harper's body had been removed from the floor. It was nowhere in sight and he concluded that somebody had notified the undertaker or the coroner and had the body removed.

"Let's go, Tate," he said quietly. "Come along with us in the buckboard

t' the ranch an' I'll get yuh a hoss t' take the place o' the one yuh said Harper shot out from under yuh."

CHAPTER IV

THE ten mile ride to the Jay Bar Pee was comparatively uneventful. Montana drove the team of spirited black Morgan geldings at a fast mile-eating pace. Bull Tate, seated on a tarpaulin in the bed of the buckboard, held on tightly when the frail vehicle rattled and lurched over chuckholes or negotiated sharp turns on two wheels.

"I'm in a hurry myself, Montany," he remarked when the buckeroo skidded the buckboard around a sharp turn, "but I'd like t' git t' the Jay Bar in one piece! Have a heart, will yuh?"

"Ain't scared, are yuh?" grinned Montana amusedly over his shoulder. "Yuh ought t' ride with us sometime when we're in a *real* hurry! Eh, Jim?"

"Yessuh!" Parkins grunted impatiently. "Gimme them reins, Montany, an' I'll show yuh both some fancy drivin'! Damn me, I want t' git t' the ranch so yuh can take up the trail o' them thievin' hoss thieves!"

For the next two or three miles old Jay B. Parkins vented his spleen on his racing blacks. He needed no whip to put them to their utmost. The tone of his thundering voice was sufficient to send them galloping forward at a break-neck speed.

Suddenly Montana gripped his seat. A cry of warning sprang into his throat at sight of a team of slow dray horses pulling a load of alfalfa directly around the butte. Parkins saw it almost at the same instant, jerked fiercely on his reins and yelled. Like black ghosts the two Morgans swung off the road, leaped a low ditch in which water from a recent shower lay a foot deep, and missed the hay-wagon by a hair. The buckboard's two left wheels ran into the ditch and thumped out again. But when it skidded back onto the road, Tate saw Montana spinning through the air like a windmill. Awed, he saw the buckeroo drop with a splash squarely into the ditch and leap up brushing mud and slime from his splattered face.

In those few split seconds, old Jim Parkins was a mighty busy man, yet he had seen his foreman leave his seat and go sailing off into space. Even before he pulled the blacks down to a halt, he was laughing with complete satisfaction. He looked back and found Montana standing in the ditch. For some seconds thereafter Tate thought he would burst his lungs with his thundering laughter.

"Haw! Haw! Haw, Montany!" he roared, gasping for breath. "Sproutin'

fins, eh, son? Waal, blast my hide, yuh shore needed a bath, yuh low-livered maverick! Come on! Yuh'll dry off pronto!"

Montana, dripping, lumbered up to the buckboard.

"Yuh're a durn ol' fool, Jim Parkins!" he growled. "Ain't yuh got better sense than t' pull a stunt like that? Supposin' it had been yuh that took that spill? Yuh'd have busted yuhr fool neck, as old as yuh are! Yuh must be gettin' yuhr second childhood, Parkins! Gimme them reins!"

Parkins handed over the reins as the buckeroo climbed into the seat. For the next half mile he was silent except for an occasional chuckle. Montana was quick to see that his anger had for the most part left him and he would have been in high spirits once more except for the loss of his breeding herd. As they approached the ranch gate at a comparatively safe gallop, he turned to the buckeroo earnestly.

"Montany," he said, "I want yuh t' pick out ten o' the best hands on the ranch an' go arter them damn rustlers! Heah me, son? Yuh take up their trail an' don't come back ontil yuh ketch 'em! Ef yuh have t' chase them buzzards clear down into Mexico, do it! Them nag-hosses is wuth money, damn big money, an' I don't want t' lose 'em! Don't come back without 'em or the scalps o' the low-livered *orejanas* that hazed 'em off! *Sabe,* son?"

"I was aimin' t' do that, Jim," said Montana, dry now, but mud from head to foot. "Kinda interferes with some plans o' mine, but I reckon I owe the Jay Bar Pee first call!"

"What plans, Montany?" demanded Parkins abruptly.

"I was fixin' t' take a couple o' the boys over into the Los Dedos Basin," said the buckeroo, "an' help Tate clean out a nest o' rattlers that have moved in on him! I reckon we owe Tate a helluva big favor, Jim, after the way he helped me get Margy back from that *orejana* Gillespie!"

"We shore as hell do, Montany!" said Parkins, looking over his shoulder at Tate gratefully. "I heered about that Lafe Harper ambushin' yuh this mo'nin' an' how yuh plugged him in the Red Onion, Tate," he continued. "My datter, Margy, has often said as how yuh gave yuhr life t' rescue her. Anytime the Jay Bar Pee can be o' help t' yuh, jes' speak yore piece an' she's yuhr'n. I want Montany t' help yuh any way he can, but I don't reckon I can spare him in the Los Dedos right now onless he trails them damn rustlers theah. But I got some spare twisters on my spread who'll be plumb glad t' go with yuh an' do whatever shootin' necessary t' 'radicate them rattlers."

"That's plumb generous o' yuh, Parkins," said Tate gratefully. "I savvy how yuh feel about them nags. If they're t' be got back, Montany is the gent t' git 'em back. I reckon yuh got fust call on him. I kin wait. I'd ruther have him with me a-shootin' than any dozen other jaspers. But if yuh want my honest t' Gawd opinion o' them hosses, I don't reckon yuh'll have t' go further for 'em than the Los Dedos Basin!"

"What do yuh mean?" Parkins demanded with sudden anger rising in him again. "Them Harpers?"

"Yuh made a bull's-eye on the fust guess, Parkins!" replied Tate. "I don't put nothin' above ol' Kiowa Harper an' his four—three scurvied sons! I reckon I'm gonna have one helluva time keepin' my ranch with them buzzards wantin' it an' the sheriff behind them t' see that they git it!"

"Sheriff behind 'em?" thundered Parkins. "I need enlightenin', *amigo*! What's he got t' do with 'em?"

"He's in cahoots with Joe Carson an' the Harpers t' sell government land in the Los Dedos Basin on forged deeds, Jim," put in Montana earnestly. "Ain't no doubt about it. We had a run-in with Burt at the County Clerk's office an' it proved jes' what most o' us have been thinkin'—that Sheriff Burt Kelton's always on the side o' them that can pay him the most money!"

"He did, eh?" Parkins was flabbergasted. "The low-down whelp!"

Montana laughed and guided the team through the ranch gate.

"He ain't gonna *come heah*!" thundered Parkins. "Yuh're gunna *take the fight t' him*! *Sabe?*" He turned to Tate again. "Yuh say them Harpers beat yuh t' registerin' yuhr claim?"

"Yep," grunted Tate. "They beat me, but I reckon they did jes' that an' no more. I had the girl in the land office blot the Harper brand in the records an' put my own in. If Carson lets it go through legal, the Los Dedos is mine."

"An' if Carson double-crosses yuh?" Parkins rumbled.

"Then he an' them Harpers'll have one helluva time gettin' me offa the Los Dedos Ranch, Parkins!" said Tate determinedly. "If he don't 'low that gal t' put my claim through t' Washington, I'll kill him on sight!"

They rode the last mile from the highway that led up through the El Pasos, along a lane leading directly to the Jay Bar corrals, in silence. Each spring, after the snows had cleared and the mud had been given a chance to harden, Parkins painted his ranch buildings. The ranch house looked fresh and white now. It was a typical hacienda, rambling over a wide area and set well away from the barns, corrals and bunkhouses. A wide veranda ran almost the entire length along the front. It boasted a comfortable lawn swing, easy chairs and heavy matting on the splintered boot-worn planks. A patch of green Bermuda grass upholstered the yard in front of the porch and it was plain that a woman's hand had dabbled in the making of a flower garden in the center of it.

In all, the Jay Bar Pee had the aspect of a rich man's spread. It had been just that until Gil Gillespie had plunged it into the red with his underhanded management. Until Montana had come over the El Pasos to dethrone Gillespie, the ranch had for years been going deeper in the red. But the books were showing signs of considerable improvement now since the buckeroo had, with the aid of Sheriff Steve Yountis of Laredo, returned to the ranch a great number of the horses rustled by Gillespie and herded overland to Marco Brett's corrals. In less than two years' time, Montana had brought the

Jay Bar from the point of bankruptcy to a paying proposition. He knew horses and he knew men. When he singled out a twister to ride under him, he never missed an honest man.

As they pulled up at a long hitchrack in front of the veranda, Margy Parkins left her comfortable lawn-swing and stepped down to meet them. She looked a great deal like her father, but where his shaggy mane was white as virgin snow, her hair was as golden as a desert sunset. She was of medium build and trim as a bright, new silver dollar in her snug-fitting riding breeches, English boots and blue silk blouse that hung open at her soft-tanned throat. She possessed her father's deep blue eyes, but they were even more mischievous. She had her father's quick movements and her soft, velvety skin was as mellow as the sun-burned honeysuckle blossoms. She walked with the easy grace of one who rides much and lives in the open. The young daughter of an old father, she was just twenty-one now and the cut of her brow betrayed the fact that she was far more intelligent than the average ranch-bred girl. She had spent three years in a finishing school in El Paso.

The moment she had seen them turning off the highway her eyes brightened with an eager look, for she knew that Montana would be driving the buckboard. Never in the two years she had known him, had she ever felt comfortable with him away from the ranch.

"Lo, Margy!" Montana leaped down from the buckboard and stepped up to her. "Jes' keep on smilin' like that, *chiquita.* Reminds me o' the sun comin' up after a stormy night!"

He laid his heavy arm about her slender shoulders.

"Don't be silly, Montana!" she retorted. "But speaking of storms, what mud puddle have you been rolling in? You look like you've been playing hide and seek with the frogs in the ditches along the road! You're soiling my nice clean blouse with your arm!"

"Excuse me, Margy," he grinned. "I plumb forgot I was so dirty! Yuh're paw got t' feelin' his oats on the way out an' dumped me off'n the seat into a puddle o' mud down by Red Butte. Durn his hide! He ought t' be spanked!"

"Spank me, eh?" Parkins swung carefully down from the seat and limped forward on his cane. Tate slid down from the gate of the buckboard. "Why, durn yuh, Montany, yuh ain't growed enough yet t' spank me! Yuh better chaw up a couple more tons o' beef afore yuh get any sech ideers into yuhr haid! Margy, we done got a surprise for yuh! Jes' look what the cat drug in!"

Tate launched his big frame around the buckboard and stepped up, grinning pleasantly.

"Howdy, Margy!" he greeted.

"Mister Tate?" she gasped, glancing at Montana strangely. "Why, we saw you fall from your horse in the middle of the Rio Grande and thought you had drowned!"

"That's what Montany said, maam," said Tate, offering his big hand to the girl. She took it promptly, with a grateful look in her eyes. "But," he

added, "it's hard t' kill a tough ol' *orejana* like me. I didn't know nothin' from the minute I fell offa my nag ontil I woke up in a *vaquero's jacal* along the river near Laredo. Anyway, I ain't daid yet, maam, an' I'm glad t' feast my eyes on yuh agin! Yuh're pruttier than ever, maam!"

"Thank you, Mister Tate," she breathed warmly. "You don't know how grateful I am to you for what you did for me down in Mexico that time. Your helping Montana rescue me from that—that dog of a Gillespie, was something we'll never be able to pay back."

"Forget it, maam," grunted Tate.

"What are you doing up in this country now?" she inquired interestedly.

"I have started a new ranch over in the Los Dedos Basin, maam," replied Tate with pride. "Wait ontil yuh see it! In a couple o' years I figger t' have one o' the biggest cow ranches in the country over there. My brand is gunna be the LD, meanin' the Los Dedos Ranch."

"That's great!" enthused Margy admiringly. "I'm glad you are going to settle down and be a permanent citizen of Pecos County. All you need now is a wife to make you step!"

Tate laughed sheepishly, and blushed.

"He's gone an' fell hard already, Margy," jibed Montana. "The son-o'-a-gun made a big hit with the gal in the County Clerk's office. Her name's Georgia Cole. Nice gal, too."

"I'd like to meet her," said Margy promptly. "They say she is an easterner. You'll have to bring her out sometime, Mister Tate. We'd be mighty glad to have you both."

"Thank yuh, maam," said Tate, "but I reckon I won't be able t' do that for sometime, seein' as how I got a heap o' work t' do over at the Los Dedos. Next time I hit Pecos, howsomevah, I'll fetch her out."

"I reckon yuh're plumb anxious t' git over theah, eh, suh?" put in Parkins earnestly.

"I shore am, Parkins," replied Tate grimly. "Ain't no tellin' what them Harpers'll be up t'. I got a feelin' they have taken advantage o' my absence an' moved in on me!"

"Then we ain't aimin' t' detain yuh, Tate," said Parkins abruptly. "They's a *remuda* in the pen ovah theah. Take yuhr pick o' any nag on my ranch. The best nag-hoss I got ain't too good fer the gent that helped save Margy from them damn Mexicans!"

"You heard about the rustling of that fifty head of breeding stock, dad?" Margy's smile vanished promptly and her red lips became firm. She watched Montana and Tate as they moved away to the corrals.

"Yep!" Parkins exploded, his temper beginning to heat up. "Red Abbott rode into town an' told me. There he comes now up the road a-flyin'. Damn my hide, Margy, I'm gonna ketch them rustlers an' hang every damn head o' them!"

"You mean you are sending Montana and the boys after them?" Margy's brows clouded in a frown.

"I am, gal!" thundered her father.

"What's all this about the—er—Harpers?" she demanded. "Who are they?"

"They're a bunch o' snakes that have been tryin' t' take Tate's ranch offa him, Margy!" Parkins boomed. "They shot his nag-hoss from under him this mo'nin' an' set him down in the mountings. That's wuth a hangin' itself, gal! Them damn Harpers have got Burt Kelton behind 'em 'an Burt's startin' t' make trouble which is gonna include the Jay Bar Pee ef I know anything about that jasper!"

"Include the Jay Bar?" Margy gasped. "How, father?"

"Burt has given Montany an' Tate jes' forty-eight hours t' git clear out o' the county," Parkins bellowed. "Kin yuh imagine anything like that—orderin' the best foreman I ever had out o' the kentry?"

"Oh!" Margy gasped again, catching her breath. "I knew it! I expected Burt to make trouble for Montana! He as much as said so that day he insulted me in town! He said he was looking for something on Montana so he could clap him in jail or run him out of the country!"

"Waal," said Parkins, "with Montana on his trail now, that hombre's goose is cooked a-ready. Montana is all set t' help Tate fight that Harper outfit, an' so am I. We owe it t' Tate. Nobody ain't ever said that Jay Bar Parkins don't pay his honest debts!"

Red Abbott thundered up amid a cloud of dust and gravel. Before his horse slid to a halt, he had hit the ground running, his flame-colored hair gleaming like burnished bronze in the sun. He was just a kid, not yet twenty, and the youngest wrangler on the Jay Bar. His freckled face was hard-set and his steely eyes blazed with wrath.

"Waal—Burt's done started takin' the sass out o' us Jay Bar Pee buckeroos, boss!" he announced, running up. "I stayed back in town a spell like Montany ast me t' sort o' see what Kelton was goin' t' do next. Waal—that lop-eared jackass got some gun-toters t'gether an' come t' the Red Onion lookin' fer Montany an' Tate. Burt hopped onto me right off, sayin' as how us buckeroos was gettin' too damn sassy an' that he was gonna take it out o' us. Wanted t' know where Montany was an' I told him t' go t' blazes. He started handlin' me plumb rough an' I poked him one on the kisser. I *vamoosed* out o' there pronto. Burt tuck a shot at me an' knocked my hat off! The low-down hoss thief! That *orejana* an' Taos Dawson an' some more are out lookin' fer Montany an' Tate with blood in their eyes. Burt has a warrant out fer their arrest, s'help my liver, fer killin' Lafe Harper! Sayed as how Montany beat Lafe up so Tate could beat him easy on the draw! Them's his exact words, boss!"

"Oh!" Margy caught her breath. "Why can't we have some peace here? You didn't tell me Montana had a fight in town—that he was mixed up in a shooting scrape, father!"

"Now ca'm yuhrself, Margy," soothed Parkins. "Take it easy an' don't get excited. Shore, Montany had a fight! Lafe Harper was cheatin' him in a leetle pokah game an' he had t' lick the whelp. But he didn't have nothin' t' do with the shootin'! Tate plugged Harper cause he went for his gun fust. I heered all about it. What else did yuh l'arn, Red?"

"Nothin' much, boss," said Red, calming down. "'cept that Burt an' his new deppities air aimin' t' haid out thisaway t' see if Montany done follered his order t' *vamoose* out o' the country. Then they're fixin' t' ride ovah inta the Los Dedos Basin arter Tate. They reckon t' fetch the both o' them in feet first. But durn him, boss, us peelers like Montany too durn well t' see him hazed off t' jail er boothill by the likes o' Kelton an' Taos Dawson! We'll fight!"

"Yuh're doubledamn right we'll fight, Red Abbott!" thundered Parkins vociferously.

CHAPTER V

THE whole Jay Bar Pee ranch seemed suddenly charged with hostility for Sheriff Burt Kelton. News of Montana's difficulties traveled about like wildfire and the buckeroos on the ranch seemed abruptly united by some common bond or other in hatred for those who would cause him injury. Those not out on the range gathered about old Jim Parkins in the fore-yard, eager for orders that would take them on the trigger trail, either for the rustlers or for Burt Kelton, Taos Dawson or anyone else associated with them. They did not care which, just so long as they got the action they craved. It was between roundup and shipping seasons now and time hung heavy on their hands.

While Bull Tate snared himself a snorting, deep-chested Morgan gelding from the *remuda* milling in the corral, Jim Parkins quizzed his peelers for whatever information they could give him concerning the rustling of his fifty head of horses from Mustang Mesa.

"Buck Daly an' me diskivvered them missin', boss," spoke up Bob Maxwell. "We was takin' a leetle *pasear* out thataway jes' t' look around, when Buck started countin' the herd. 'Co'se we saw plenty sign that somethin' was wrong even afore he started countin'. Hoss shoe tracks an' all that, since the rains t'other day. Soon as we checked up on them nags we started lookin' around t' see which way them *orejanas* druv the nags."

"Which way did they go?" demanded Montana, who stood beside Margy and her father.

"They racked right up inta the El Pasos, Montany," said Maxwell promptly. "I reckon they was a-headin' fer some point ovah around the Los Dedos Basin kentry. We follered the trail a spell thinkin' we might pick up some ideer o' who they were. Up beside the spring in Box Canyon I picked up this lettah. Heah 'tis, Montany. Might give yuh a leetle info'mation! Them hombres shore didn't bother t' hide their trail!"

Montana accepted the missive sternly. It was badly crumpled and very much soiled. But for all its frayed edges and hard usage, he was able to read the name and address on the envelope. As he did so he flinched as if he had been knifed in the back, looked sharply at Parkins and swore between his clenched teeth. Before he knew it he half-started to shove the damning bit of evidence in a pocket, but Parkins bristled with an order.

"Gimme that lettah, Montany!" he thundered. "I want t' see the name o' the low-livered snake that left it on the trail o' my rustled nag-hosses! Gimme that damn thing so I kin mark his name on a slug!".

"Better go slow, Jim," said Montana, watching Tate strangely out of the sides of his eyes. Tate was taking the rough spots off his borrowed horse.

"Go slow?" Parkins thundered. "What do yuh mean, *slow,* Montany? Who ever lost that letter up in Box Canyon done helped rustle my nag-hosses! Gimme it!"

With quick wrath Parkins reached forward and snatched the missive from his hands. Montana's blood suddenly went cold in his veins. He turned his back on Parkins as the rancher let out an explosion that even Tate heard in the breaking pen above the clatter and thud of the flying hoofs under him.

"P. J. Tate—Laredo, Texas!" Parkins thundered in both surprise and unbridled fury. "Why, damn my hide! This cain't be *Bull Tate!"*

"That's Bull Tate's name on the letter, Jim," said Montana quietly. "I wanted t' ask him about it personally. Yuh might not understand Tate like I do. But, hell! There's a mistake somewhere! He wouldn't rustle no Jay Bar Pee nags! He ain't a rustler! Besides, he ain't got no hands yet on his Los Dedos Ranch t' help him run off with fifty head o' nags!"

"Theah was fo' rustlers in the crowd, Montany," said Buck Daly, looking suspiciously at Tate whose horse had suddenly quit bucking and was being guided toward the hitchrack at the house. "That feller's name Tate?"

Neither Montana nor Parkins replied. They watched Tate ride up, their faces stern. Even Margy looked at him with keen suspicions, yet she could not bring herself to believe that Bull Tate, who had almost given his life that she might be returned safely to the Jay Bar, would have rustled those horses from the back range. Nor could Montana Larkin.

"Yuh folks shore raise some hoofed dynamite heah, Parkins!" grinned Tate gayly as he rode up. "It shore is hell t' be a one-hoss rancher, eh?" He pulled up at the rack, dropped down and threw his reins over the bar. Buckeroo hands dropped to black-handled .45's.

"One-hoss rancher?" Parkins snorted, with tempest bursting loose com-

pletely within him. "Why damn my skin, Tate! Yuh might o' started out with one damn nag-hoss, but it 'pears t' me yuh didn't waste no time addin' t' yuhr string! An' I was fixin' all the time t' order my twisters t' help a lousy rustler!"

Tate was taken aback by his sarcasm and the stern, ominous looks from the buckeroos. He looked first from one to the other and then at Montana. The buckeroo shook his head as if he were speechless, and looked down at the ground. The air seemed sur-charged with electricity and he sensed quickly that he was in no uncertain danger. He dropped his big hands down toward the .45's at his sides.

Parkins took two quick steps forward and stood within arm's length of him. He thrust the envelope up in his face and roared furiously.

"Ever see this lettah afore, suh?" he demanded caustically.

Tate accepted the missive curiously, looked it over and snorted.

"Sure I have, Parkins," he confessed promptly. "That letter's from my sister up in Colorady! Come t' me when I was recuperatin' from my hurts down near Laredo almost two years ago. Why?"

"Tate," Parkins thundered, "that lettah was found by one o' my twisters up at Box Canyon Springs where the *orejanas* that rustled my nag-hosses stopped for a drink! How the hell did it git theah if *yuh* didn't leave it?"

Tate's brows clouded. He looked long and hard at the rancher and then at Montana and Margy. The girl looked away, not wishing to see the injured look in his dark eyes. Montana regarded him quizzically.

"Durned if I know, Parkins," Tate said at length. "I been carryin' this letter in my pocket for a long time. Fust one I've had from my sister for purtty near six years, I reckon. It's plumb certain that I ain't been up at Box Canyon Springs since 'way afore Montany an' me racked south two years ago. 'Co'se, I kin see what yuh're drivin' at, Jim. But yuh're barkin' up the wrong tree. I didn't rustle yuhr nags, nor did I have anything t' do with it. I cain't figger out how this letter got up there. That's gospel!"

"I think this jasper's lyin', Parkins!" spoke up Maxwell hostilely.

"Shut yuhr mouth, Maxwell!" Montana bristled with quick anger. His gun was out like a streak of lightning. "The first hombre that pulls any o' that stuff on my friend, Tate, has got t' try it on me, also! I jes' got done sayin' that Bull Tate ain't no rustler, an' I meant jes' that! They's a dozen ways that letter could have got up there! Mebbe some jasper picked his pockets an' he didn't know it! How do we know that them damn Harpers over in the Los Dedos didn't steal it an' purposely plant it at the springs where it'd be found an' suspicion throwed on him? They been tryin' damn hard t' get him out o' the country so they could steal his ranch. Now listen t' me! Bull Tate saved my life once-twice an' mebbe more, an' he saved Margy Parkins! I'm for him an' I ain't lettin' him down regardless! Is that plain?"

Maxwell said no more. He hung his head and shifted from one foot to the other.

"Thanks, Montany," grunted Tate. "Yuh gave me a' ideer! Like I said t'day comin' out from Pecos, I'll bet my boots agin a pair o' hoss shoes that them Harpers had somethin' t' do with that rustlin'! An' in doin' it they figgered on turn' the Jay Bar Pee agin me by plantin' this letter where yuhr trailers'd find it! They musta snitched it from my place when I warn't lookin'. They're like that, them damn Harpers!"

Parkins looked at him steadily for a moment. He had to admit to himself that Tate spoke with a distinct ring of truth in his voice. And he began feeling suddenly that he had jumped his traces too quickly in accusing him of the rustling.

"Mebbe I'm a' o'nery ol' fool, suh," said the rancher in a calm, regretful tone. "If I rubbed yuhr fur the wrong way, I'm plumb sorry. I hate like hell t' brand a gent that ain't noways guilty, but yuh got t' admit that yuhr letter'd jes' about hang yuh pronto anywhere else. If them Harpers done that rustlin', they got t' git theah just deserts. I feel like a lowdown k'yote, suh, for not givin' yuh a chance t' explain afore I blew up. What yuh said sounded purtty straight t' me, Tate, an' if yuh don't hold no hard feelin's, theah's my hand, suh! An' what I said about orderin' my twisters t' help yuh fight them snakes that's botherin' yuh, still goes! My hand, suh!"

Smiling grimly, Tate accepted his horny fist and wrung it firmly.

" 'Cose they ain't no hard feelin's, Parkins," he said. "I kin see how yuh feel about them nags an' the letter. I reckon I savvy how anybody'd jump at conclusions arter findin' sech evidence on the trail. I don't blame yuh a bit. Now, ef it's all the same t' yuh, I reckon I'll git goin' over the mountings."

"I'm goin' with yuh, Tate," said Montana determinedly. "I want t' hit the trail o' them rustlers soon as it gets light in the mo'nin'. Can't do much t'night, 'cept ride, an' if what Maxwell says about the trail headin' toward the Los Dedos is true, like as not we won't have no trouble crossin' it anywhere on the other side o' the mountains."

Margy grasped Montana by the arm.

"Why don't you wait until morning, Montana?" she asked with troubled eyes. "No use going off tonight."

"I reckon its best we start t'night, Margy," said Montana softly. "Every minute we lose puts more distance between us an' the rustlers. We got t' get 'em! If we don't, they'll come back an' run off another bunch. We got t' get 'em!"

"I realize that, *querido,*" said the girl. "But there will be trouble—shooting. What are a few horses to—to a life? Maybe your life, Montana."

"Forget it, Margy," Montana shrugged. "This ain't no time t' talk like that. Besides, I can take care o' myself an' I reckon the boys can also. Now yuh jes' sit tight an' don't worry. We'll come back in a day or two, all o' us, an' we'll bring them nags back with us!" He looked sharply at Maxwell. "Throw

a hull on my nag Skyrocket, will you, Maxwell?" he said. "I'll hop into some other clothes! The rest o' yuh fellers saddle up an' get ready t' slope! We're pullin' out with Tate in five minutes!"

There was a quick scramble of men toward the corrals. The tension that had hovered over the Jay Bar seemed suddenly to break loose into hurried activity. The buckeroos began snaring their best horses from the remuda in the pens and preparing them for the night ride. Maxwell roped Skyrocket, an unusually fast horse for a Morgan gelding, a breed noted more for its power and toughness than for racing qualities. The great black brute had a white star on its forehead and two white stockings on its forelegs. It was easily as tall as the powerful horse Tate had selected, and as vicious.

With consternation written plainly on her face, Margy watched it all from the hitchrack in front of the house. She saw Montana disappear into the bunkhouse, yanking off his slashed, muddy shirt as he went. Almost before she knew it he was back in the yard again and running stiff-leggedly towards the corrals. He was dressed in clean blue denim now and was buckling on his gun-belts as he ran. In a scabbard slung perfunctorily by its strap over his shoulder, was his carbine. She saw quickly that he meant business. He went straight to Skyrocket where Maxwell had left him standing just outside of the corral to go after his own mount. Quickly he snapped his carbine-scabbard to the saddle and mounted.

True to its name, Skyrocket started out in great, head-long leaps. He tore across the yard and out into a feed lot beyond. Margy watched, as did Tate and Parkins. She always liked to see Montana ride a bucking bronco. He did it with so much ease and grace, as if he had been born in the saddle of a bucker. Never once did he let his mount feel even vaguely that it was master of the situation. He stuck like a burr, clouting Skyrocket's wicked little ears on every jump with his hat. The Morgan performed every trick in his bag, except the deadly pinwheel and throwing himself on the ground to kill his tormentor. Suddenly he rose up on his hind legs and pawed at the darkening sky. As if that settled the issue in an admission of defeat, he came down with a thump that jarred Montana's teeth. Then he walked briskly forward.

"Skyrocket's shore feelin' his oats!" the buckeroo grinned, panting hard, as he dismounted beside Tate's horse. "Sometime the son-o'-a-gun is gonna pile me up an' make me like it!"

"Yuh're plumb right, Montany," commented Tate philosophically. "Every gent has got t' take a set-back sometime. I wonder if I'll git mine from them Harpers?"

"Co'se not, suh!" grunted Parkins, encouragingly. "Ef yuh're in the right an' *know yuh're right, ain't nothin' kin whip yuh!* I know! I been through everything yuh're goin' through now! I had the same fight on my hands when I settled heah yeahs ago! I played honest an' won. The other hombres, waal—see that leetle knoll 'way out yondah? That's where I planted 'em!"

Margy shuddered.

"Let's not talk about murdering and killing now, father," she said. "The future looks bad enough without digging into the past!"

"Yuh're gettin' soft, Margy!" chided Parkins.

He turned to find Tate mounting.

"Keep a' eye on this jasper, Tate," he said, "an' don't let him git too damn rambunctious! He's got a bad habit o' stickin' up his snout an' invitin' folks t' take a shot at it! Margy's been tryin' t' break him o' that habit an' yuh'll go a long way t'ard helpin' her if yuh make him keep his snout down where them rustlers cain't blow it off!"

"Shore, Parkins!" grinned Tate. "Jes' leave it t' me!"

"Well, adios Margy!" Montana wanted to kiss her good-bye, but was plainly embarrassed. She tipped her lips up to him and waited. Parkins cleared his throat and looked away as if sensing the reason for his hesitancy. Tate grinned and started smoothing out his mount's black mane. But they both heard the *smack* of loving lips.

"Good-bye, *querida,*" said Margy. "Please be careful!"

"Don't worry, ma'am," Montana urged. "Ill be all right."

He mounted abruptly, waved at Parkins and whirled Skyrocket toward the waiting twisters. Tate danced his horse around and charged after him. The whole cavalcade thundered out of the yard and down the lane toward the highway. The Jay Bar seemed to become suddenly quiet now that they were gone. Even Parkins felt it. But a great loneliness crept over his daughter as it always did when Montana rode away. This time there was something different about his going. Somehow she sensed grave danger for him. Until she could see them no more in the fast dimming dusk, she stood by the rack.

An hour later, just when they were finishing supper and Jim Quak, their house boy and private cook was bringing in the dessert, they heard the thunder of many flying hoofs coming up the lane. Startled, Margy glanced at her father.

"They must be coming back, father!" she exclaimed. "Something must have happened!"

"Cain't be them!" grunted Parkins, wiping his mouth on a napkin and rising hastily. He snatched up his cane where it rested against the table. "Too many nag-hosses comin' t' be Montany an' the boys! Let's take a look-see. I got a hunch who's comin', howsomevah!"

"Who?" Margy's face went suddenly white.

"Yuh ain't fergot what Red Abbott told us, gal?" Parkins rumbled.

"You mean Burt Kelton and his gunmen?" she gasped, alarmed. "After Montana?"

"Couldn't be nobody else at this time o' day, Margy!" he snorted. "Let's go see, anyhow!"

As if sensing trouble, Jim Quak glided swiftly and soundlessly back into his kitchen, snatched up a meat cleaver and returned to the dining room

as Parkins, followed by Margy, stepped out onto the front porch. Just then a large group of riders thundered up to the rack, halted and started to dismount. In the feeble light that flooded from the screened front door, Margy observed many strange faces. Parkins scanned them closely and started abruptly to get thoroughly angry when he recognized the pointed features of Sheriff Burt Kelton as he stepped down from his lathered horse. Kelton stepped arrogantly toward the veranda, roughly shoving his companions aside. Parkins saw instantly that he was well-plastered with sufficient liquid tonnage to make him mean and ugly.

"Jes' a minute, Kelton"—Jim Parkins never could bring himself to honor him with the title of sheriff—"What the hell do yuh want? An' stay by yuhr nag-hosses ontil I invite yuh t' step up an' pow-wow!"

"We don't need no invitation, Parkins!" Kelton growled hostilely. "I'm sheriff o' this county an' I got a right t' go where I damn like! Yuh step aside! We're gunna search yuhr house for Montana Larkin an' that Tate hombre! They're heah, ain't they?"

"No they ain't heah!" exploded Parkins with rising fury. "An' yuh wouldn't git 'em ef they was! Yuh bettah *vamoose* with yuh hiahed killahs an' don't come back! Yuh ain't got a damn thing agin Montany Larkin, an' yuh know it! Yuh're jes' tryin' t' make trouble for him because yuh hate him an' yuh're jealous! Now git out, Kelton, afore I sic my dogs on the whole caboodle o' yuh!"

"Yuh better not interfere with the law, Parkins!" belched Kelton ominously. "I got a warrant for the arrest o' Montany Larkin for aidin' in a murder an' by hell I'm gonna clap him in jail as soon as I lay my hands on the skunk! Come on, Taos! Yuh also, Durango! We're gunna search this house! I got a hunch Montana an' Tate are a-hidin' behind a pair o' skirts!"

"Just a minute, Burt!" Margy's voice was cold and penetrating. "If Montana heard you say that, he'd kill you! He is not here, fortunately for you, and you are not going to bring your herd of cattle into my house to smell it up! Now go on about your business!"

Kelton stepped up on the veranda, scowling.

"Yuh git out o' the way, Margy!" he said thickly. "We ain't aimin' t' hurt yuh none, but if yuh git too sassy, I'll pay back what yuh did t' me in town!"

"It would be just like a coward of your stripe to slap a woman, Burt Kelton!" she flung at him. "We have told you that neither Montana or Tate are here! They've gone!"

"Gone?" Kelton's glassy eyes narrowed. "Where'd they go? They take my advice an' beat it?"

"No they didn't take yuhr crazy advice, Kelton!" thundered Parkins with utmost sarcasm. "They've gone arter some rustlers—doin' yuhr job for yuh!"

"Now ain't that nice an' generous o' them?" Kelton jeered evilly. "Doin' my job for me! That's what I call service, eh, Taos?"

Taos Dawson, a raw-boned, nondescript individual of indeterminate antiquity with a walrus mustache and the smallest, wickedest eyes either Margy or her father had ever seen outside of a pig-sty, stepped uninvited onto the veranda. He was a man of medium height, but his arms were long. His cheeks were sunken and his skin looked like the fleshy side of a new pelt. He had a hooked nose that was bent a bit to the left as if somebody's right fist had bashed it out of line with the rest of his ugly face. His gorilla-like arms hung down, almost to his knees. As if to make up for their length he wore his twin six-shooters strapped to his legs just above his knees. The one hanging at his right had its black butt facing forward. The other lay in its holster in the approved fashion. Both Margy and her father wondered at the different positions of his guns until they saw that the first three fingers of his right hand were missing. Then they knew. Taos Dawson shot with his left hand entirely and to make his right gun easily drawn, he wore it with the butt forward. He wore a shining new deputy sheriff's badge pinned conspicuously on his checkered vest.

"Yuh betcher life that's service, Burt!" he said in a voice that startled Margy. It was the kind least expected of a man of his breed. It was high-pitched, almost like that of a woman's. He looked Margy over with an appraising eye as he spoke. "Yuh betcher life! Right nice lookin' *tart* here!"

Jim Parkins' face went livid with blind rage.

"Tart? *Tart?*" he roared, snapping his heavy cane up and grabbing it midway down. "Why, damn you, suh! Git down on yuhr knees an' apologize for that! Git down, I say, or I'll bash yuhr brains in!"

Taos Dawson's hands brushed his guns. If he had it in his mind to draw, he certainly had no time to do so, for Jim Parkins' silver-knobbed walking stick crashed down on the top of his head with a thump that could have been heard clear out by the corrals. He was knocked stone cold with the first blow. Margy screamed, turned and ran into the house. Parkins started to follow her, swearing roundly.

"Yuh damn ol' killah!" Kelton cried fiercely, reaching forward to strike him. "I'll teach yuh t' strike my deppities! Gimme that cane!"

"Theah, suh!" Parkins adroitly dodged out of his reach. "Take it an' be damned t' yuh!"

And Burt Kelton got it! The silver knob of Parkins' walking stick whistled like a bullet past his ear and caught him a deadening blow on the right shoulder, making his whole side numb. With a howl of pain he leaped off the veranda. As he did so the Durango Kid bounded forward like a charging catamount. Parkins was just limping inside the house. Before he could bring his stick up to strike again, the Kid struck him murderously over the head with the long barrel of his .45. As he slumped down with a groan, his silvery hair became crimson as blood spurted from a long gash beneath it.

"Come on in, hombres!" the Kid growled abruptly. "This ol' hellion can't

do no more hurt! Fetch Taos inside! I smell grub! We're gunna eat afore we take up the trail o' them two jaspers!"

Without hesitation he bent down, grasped the limp form of Parkins under the arm-pits and flung him away from the door. Then he stepped into the house with his gun out. As he did so he saw something glittering flying at him through the air from the direction of the kitchen door. Instinctively he ducked, threw up his gun and fired. Simultaneously with the crashing of his gun, Jim Quak's meat cleaver buried itself in the log door-frame. But the Durango Kid's bullet did not miss his mark. It caught Jim Quak squarely between the eyes. From in the kitchen came a scream from Margy.

Knowing that she was alone now she had better sense than to stay in the house and try to fight off the posse. As she dashed out through the rear door into the open, she had but one thought uppermost in her terrified mind. That was to call the Jay Bar night riders in from the range with the burning of a large stack of hay that stood in the feed lot just beyond the deserted bunkhouse. Her father had often warned her that if she was ever alone at the ranch-house and needed help, to set off that haystack. Out on the ranges were some eight or ten night riders. She knew that the burning stack would bring them in galloping.

CHAPTER VI

THE Jay Bar Pee ranges would have been flat but for the low, rolling, grass-clad hillocks that billowed away in either direction from the house. Except from the range in back of Mustang Mesa which formed the point of the arrowhead-shaped valley in which the ranch lay between the towering El Pasos and the Bitter Root foothills, the twisters on duty would be able to see the flames without half trying.

Almost praying she struck a match. Coming through the kitchen she had snatched a handful of sulphurs from a box over the cook-stove. The first one hissed out. She wondered if any of Kelton's men had detected the momentary flash. With her heart thumping in her throat she scratched another, applied it to the dry hay and stepped back.

As the stack caught fire with a loud *whoosh* she heard a shout from the house. Her heart in her mouth, she looked in that direction to see a half dozen of Kelton's men dash out. She felt that they were aware of her intentions in setting the stack afire, but it was too late now to put it out. Within a moment the whole yard was illuminated by the blaze which shot seventy-five feet in the air.

Led by Kelton himself the desperadoes who had been sworn in by him as deputies, ran up. In the light of the fire they saw her rush like a deer for the bunkhouse to barricade herself inside. It was the Durango Kid who managed to get between her and the long building. With an exultant shout he ran forward to head her off while the others started closing in around her. He looked like an evil ogre in the dancing light. For he was short and squat and his straw-colored hair had gone long without attention.

Finding herself suddenly cornered, she struck at him first with her closed fist. As he flung his hairy arms about her she laid both of his cheeks open with her nails. She jabbed at the Kid's eyes and missed only because he let her go with a howl of pain and threw up his arms. But she planted her right boot squarely in his groin. He went double with the wind kicked out of him.

Then Kelton caught her from behind and lifted her clear of the ground. She wrenched and fought gamely, but his strong arms held her. He had amazing strength for a man so dissipated. As if she were a sack of meal he flung her up over his shoulder and carried her houseward, kicking and fighting to free herself. Behind her trouped the hard-faced deputies from the *Santos Rojos*. The light in their eyes betrayed their eagerness for a night of sport. But Burt Kelton had his own ideas about that.

Margy Parkins had avoided him all too long now and as much as the Harpers wanted the Los Dedos Basin, he wanted her. He meant to have her this night. He carried her onto the veranda. There she saw her father lying where he had fallen, his silvery hair streaked with crimson now. She screamed and fought harder. Burt Kelton only held her tighter, kicked open the door and flung her ruthlessly inside. Taos Dawson, with a lump on the top of his half-bald head the size of a tea-cup, was sitting at the table, cursing his luck roundly. He laughed in a sickly voice when Margy whirled through the door, followed by Kelton and the others. She lost her balance and fell near him. He snatched her by the hair and glared evilly into her horrified face.

"Let me alone!" she screamed. "What have you done to my father? You will pay for this—every one of you cowardly dogs!"

"Let her alone, Dawson!" Burt flung at him, striding up. "I'm runnin' this show!"

Dawson scowled rebelliously. He thrust Margy away and stood up.

"Is that so?" he jeered coldly. "I wouldn't be too damn sure o' that, Burt! Don't go gittin' any funny ideers in yuhr haid! We air all in this for what we kin get out o' it an' yuh're gunna string along with us! Whatcha think we went sheriffin' fer? T' he'p yuh? Like hell we did! Now ca'm yuhrself an' don't be a ijit! When we git done trimmin' the yokels o' Pecos, we'll be a-wearin' di'monds in ouah spurs!"

Their eyes clashed for an instant. Then beaten by Dawson's challenging stare, Kelton dropped his head toward Margy who was cringing in mortal fear on the floor.

"What's the ideer o' settin' fiah t' that stack, hey?" he demanded of her,

ignoring Dawson's challenge. "Tryin' t' signal t' yuhr cheap lovah, eh? Waal, that's okay with me! Let him come back! I'm aimin' t' kill him on sight!"

In her wild terror in setting the stack ablaze, Margy had thought only of bringing the Jay Bar night riders from the range. What if Montana would see the fire from somewhere up on the slopes of the El Pasos and come thundering back to investigate? Would he ride directly into the arms of Burt Kelton and his lawless deputies who would shoot him on sight? Or was he too far away now to see the blaze? She prayed that he was.

"If Montana comes back and finds you here, Burt Kelton," she masked her terror behind an air of confidence, "he will do all the killing necessary! I might as well tell you now that he is not very far away and with him are Bull Tate and twelve Jay Bar riders! You can look for them back any moment! Besides, there are eight twisters on the ranges who by now have seen my signal! They'll be along soon! God help you and your cowardly pack when they come back!"

"Let 'em come!" the Durango Kid, still nursing his groin, jeered. "That'll save us the trouble o' goin' arter 'em! We'll corral that Tate an' Montany plumb pronto an' make mince-meat out o' them!"

Taos glanced quickly about the room.

"Shore!" he growled. "Let 'em come! We could stand off a whole army heah! There'll be twenty o' them galoots an' twenty-five o' us! An' we air the law! They cain't buck the law, by hell, an' we'll damn soon prove it t' 'em!" He turned abruptly on Margy who by now had risen to her feet and had backed away into a corner. "Yuh get us somethin' t' eat, damn yuh!" he continued. "We're aimin' t' stay a spell an' enjoy yuhr hospitality!"

"I better keep a' eye on her," said the Kid as Margy started toward the kitchen. "She might try somethin'."

"*Bueno,* Durango!" grunted Dawson as if taking full command of the situation. "Don't let her git away out the back door, an' make her dish up them vittles pronto! Slade! Where the hell air yuh?"

"Right here, Taos!" Jake Slade, a tall, gaunt ruffian who had remained out on the veranda to watch the flaming haystack, stepped promptly inside. "Whatcha want, boss?"

"Yuh take the boys outside an' throw a guard around the house!" Dawson ordered. "Shoot the fust jasper that racks in heah! Sabe?"

"Okay, Taos," grinned Slade.

Kelton said nothing. The others stomped out heavily. Outside the yard was illuminated brightly by the burning hay. The whole sky about the place was red, but the hay had burned down somewhat by now.

"Sit down, sheriff!" Dawson ordered suddenly. "Take a load offa yuhr hoofs an' have a' eye-opener! We got business t' talk over whilst our charmin' hostess dishes up the vittles!"

He produced a pint bottle of whiskey from somewhere and set it in front

of Burt. The sheriff needed no second invitation to test its contents. He drank deeply with Dawson watching approvingly.

"That's the way I like t' see a jasper drink, Burt!" praised Dawson craftily. "Shows yuh got a heap o' guts. Now let's git down t' business. Yuh ain't done much explainin' yit about that Los Dedos sityation. Supposin' yuh wise me up, sheriff, afore we go any further a-helpin' yuh 'radicate that Tate jasper from the scenery."

"Ain't much t' explain, Dawson," said Kelton. "'Ceptin' Joe Carson put me onto makin' a heap o' money which I was gonna pay t' yuh on account. I don't reckon they'll be enough *dinero* in it for all o' us, but I figure t' git myself out o' hock t' yuh. I——"

"Never mind yuhrself, Kelton!" Dawson broke in as from the kitchen came the clatter of pots and pans. "What's the dodge with Carson? I know yuh two air up t' somethin' over in the Los Dedos Basin. Come on! Out with it, Burt! We air friends, ain't we? Hain't I proved that by lettin' yuh drink an' gamble free at the *Santos Rojos*?"

"I reckon so, Taos," said Kelton, feeling the effects of his synthetic courage. He eyed the bottle hungrily and Dawson cunningly shoved it toward him again. "Like I was sayin'," he continued, taking the bottle, "Joe Carson an' the Harpers have hit on a scheme t' sell land t' homesteaders an' ranchers that are beginnin' t' flock into the Los Dedos Basin. They have staked off every foot o' land that's wuth a nickel an' have propositioned me for pertection in case they have any trouble with jaspers like that Bull Tate hombre who is on t' the dodge. I'm t' git twenty percent o' the take which will come from the sale o' that land on deeds which Carson is fakin'. Everything was goin' accordin' t' hoyle when this Tate hombre racks into town an' gits hisself wise t' Carson's scheme. Tate, yuh know, has staked out a big ranch right in the middle o' things, an' it's the most valuable piece o' land in the Basin. We want that passel o' land, Taos, because the Harpers already have got a rich buyer from El Paso. An' we want Tate out o' the way because he's too damn smart."

"I see," grunted Dawson. "That's gov'ment land, ain't it? How kin yuh sell it?"

"On faked deeds," said Burt readily. "That's Carson's scheme."

"But hell," said Taos. "Supposin' yuhr buyers start lookin' up the land records? Where'd Carson be then?"

Kelton laughed thickly.

"Carson's runnin' the Land Office, ain't he?" he said. "Don't yuh reckon he knows how t' keep books? He's got two sets o' books, he told me. One he keeps jes' in case some gov'ment agents come prowlin' around. The other is t' show t' any jaspers lookin' up the titles. *Sabe?* Or is real estate too deep for yuh?"

"I reckon it's purtty deep, Burt," grinned Dawson, "but deep or not, she

sounds purtty good t' me. I'm risin' t' declare myself in on this little deal. Frum now on, it's gunna be Dawson an' Company! Sabe, sheriff?"

Burt Kelton looked startled.

"Yuh cain't butt in thataway, Dawson!" he protested. "There ain't enough in it! Besides, the Harpers might have somethin' t' say about it. An' Carson also!"

"Let 'em say it, Burt!" growled Taos. "Won't make no difference. I'm in whether they want it or not, or mebbe they would like me t' tip off the gov'ment what they're up t', eh?"

"Yuh wouldn't do that, Dawson," said Burt dismally.

"No?" snorted Dawson. "Yuh ought t' know me purtty well by now, Burt. Ef I don't git what I want, nobody gits it! Sabe? I want a share o' yuhr graft, or yuh don't git no graft! See? An' here I am, lettin' yuh use me so's yuh kin make money! That's generosity, ain't it? Lettin' yuh use me an' my friends t' pull this Los Dedos stunt?"

"I reckoned yuh'd be glad t' help me after all the favors I've done for yuh, Taos," groaned Burt helplessly. "Ain't I been lettin' yuh run the *Santos Rojos* an' them other joints in the face o' public sentiment? Ain't that enough?"

"Yuh're a fool, Burt!" jeered Dawson craftily. "A feller like yuh could clean-up plumb big in the county ef yuh only had the brains! They ain't nothin' yuh couldn't have ef yuh wanted it. But now that yuh got me an' the Kid as yuhr chief deppities, yuh ain't got nothin' more t' worry about, Burt. We'll jes' run things like they oughta be run an' all yuh got t' do is t' okay it so's it'll be legal! *Sabe?*"

"Yuh mean that yuh're gunna use the sheriff's office t' hide dirty doin's?" Kelton was more startled than ever.

"Perzactly, Burt!" said Dawson ruthlessly. "Ain't we been doin' it all along —yuh lettin' us deal in wimmen an' run crooked gamblin' games an' all? What's t' stop us from goin' arter bigger game? Why, *amigo,* since they opened up them gold mines up in the El Pasos, this damn county is rainin' *dinero!* That Los Dedos dodge is kid's play alongside o' what we kin do with that gold comin' out o' the mountings. The shipments air runnin' bigger every day an' air jes' waitin' t' be taken by smart jaspers like us! An' who'd ever think o' lookin' fer road agents in the sheriff's office?"

"Yuh couldn't pull that sort o' stuff long, Dawson," said Burt. "I'm only servin' out Blaze Clark's time. There'll be a 'lection afore long. I know I ain't got a chance t' be 'lected. Too many folks agin me."

Dawson laughed derisively.

"Why, yuh pore galoot!" he said. "We could clean up afore yuhr time runs out! Ef yuh play ball with weuns, we'll play ball with yuh. When the time comes, we'll have yuh re-elected. I reckon atween me an' the Kid, we could jes' about control every damn vote in this county! Jes' yuh leave it all t' me! I'll show yuh how t' run things heah! What do yuh say?"

"I dunno, Taos," said Burt, draining the bottle. Dawson produced another pint from a pocket. "I reckon I'll have t' think it over."

"Yuh don't need t' bother thinkin', Kelton," growled Dawson with finality. "Yuh're thinkin' has already been done fer yuh! It'd be jes' as easy t' have me or anybody else elected in yuhr place, yuh know, so take yuhr choice—string along with weuns an' make yuhrself rich, or push up daisies on Boothill!"

Kelton was not too drunk to see the corner in which he had placed himself. Taos Dawson had a rope around his neck and, drunk as he was, he realized it more than ever. He threw up his hands resignedly and slumped down in his chair.

"Yuh win, Taos!" he said dismally. "I know when I'm licked. I'd be a fool not t' string along with yuh!"

"Yuh shore would, Burt!" said Dawson significantly. "Yuh shore would ef yuh know what I mean! Now fust off, we'll take care o' that Bull Tate hombre. I got a lettle debt t' pay off t' that skunk an' yuh watch us pay up! I take it this Montana Larkin jasper, bein' a pal o' Tate's, knows too much also, eh? Waal, we'll fix his clock pronto an' then we'll have clear sailin' in cleanin' up in the Los Dedos. That'll be our fust job. Next, we'll see what kin be done about the stages carryin' the mine shipments. *Sabe?*"

Margy, her face smeared with soot from the wood stove in the kitchen, appeared suddenly in the dining room carrying a large plate of ham and eggs. The Durango Kid, dogging her footsteps, followed with a pot of coffee.

"There!" she cried, placing the plate on the table. "I hope you choke on it, you pack of dogs! Take it in a corner and growl over it! If you want more, cook it yourself! I'm going to see what you did to my father! Try and stop me and I'll scratch your eyes out!"

Dawson grinned at Burt and the Kid.

"Spunky leetle *tart*, hombres!" he said, and she glared back at him with bitter loathing. "I admire spunk in a gal an' a hoss, but yuh got t' beat hell out o' them both t' make 'em behave! G'wan with her, Durango, an' let her see what a fool her ol' man was fer a—er—strikin' a' officer o' the law! Heh! Heh! Heh! But fetch her back pronto, Kid, fer I'm feelin' plumb big-hearted t'night! I'm givin' her t' the sheriff t' sort o' seal ouah bonds o' friendship! How's that fer generosity, Burt? I allus treats my friends plumb decent, sheriff, an' when I likes a gent, I likes him. See? When I don't, waal, I got a notch in my gun-butts fer every hombre that ever rubbed my fur the wrong way, 'cept one!"

"Bull Tate, eh, Taos?" the Kid grinned viciously. "Yuh'n me both! I'll betcha my hoss agin a chaw o' t'baccy I git him fust!"

"The bet's on, Durango!" laughed Dawson. "Soon's we finish chuck, we air takin' up that jasper's trail! Dive into them ham an' aiggs, Burt! We air gunna start on the Los Dedos fust. Arter that, waal, jes' yuh leave it t' me,

Burt, an' I'll put di'monds in yuhr spurs, or ——" and he sent Kelton a threatening look, "or plant yuh in Boothill, whichever yuh want!"

"Yuh ain't got no cause t' talk like that, Taos," said Burt meekly. "Ain't I already said I was with yuh? I'm stayin' in the game!"

"See that yuh do, sheriff!" Dawson scraped a half dozen eggs on his plate and ran his cup over with coffee, "an' don't fergit that I'm runnin' this show! I have allus wanted t' run a town like Pecos! Soon's we git back in town I'm gunna send a wire t' some o' my friends ovah in New Mexico t' come heah an' help us skim the milk!"

CHAPTER VII

By now the glare of the burning stack had dwindled down to a red glow emanating from the bed of dying ashes. The ranch yard was dark once more. Margy, stepping fearfully onto the veranda, saw the dim forms of the deputies as they kept watch about the house. Roughly the Durango Kid shoved her forward toward the silent, bloody form of her father.

"Theah's yuhr ol' man, *chiquita!*" the Kid laughed callously. "I shoulda shot the ol' fool instead o' jes' cloutin' him ovah the haid with my gun!"

Margy ignored him and helplessly took her father's bloody head in her arms, running her soft hand gently over his forehead. The instant she touched his brow her body grew taut inside. A scream forced its way from her throat. Then suddenly she began to laugh, slowly at first, brokenly. Abruptly that laugh became hysterical, filling the whole ranch yard with its high-pitched note, causing Durango and the men stationed along the veranda to stare at her curiously.

Under her light, loving touch, Jim Parkins' forehead was cold and clammy. His eyes were staring wide, fixed, and his lips were twisted in grotesque agony. Jim Parkins was dead!

He might have survived the Durango Kid's savage blow except for one reason—an old head injury. Long before Margy had been born, or even before Pecos had mushroomed up from a sea of sage brush, he had received the blunt side of a Comanche tomahawk on the side of the head. That blow had cracked his skull three ways, but he had never known it. Nor would he ever know it now. Those cracks had never knitted together and when the Durango Kid struck at him, the barrel of his heavy gun fell directly over that spot, effectively finishing what the enraged Comanche had once started to do.

Suddenly Margy Parkins' hysterical laugh died on her colorless lips. Seated

on the floor of the veranda, her father's head in her lap, her hand underneath his vest, she looked up at the Durango Kid where he stood in the flood of lamplight that came in a shaft through the door. Cool as a cucumber now with the realization that her father was dead, her tear-reddened eyes blazed with the kind of a fury that only a woman of injured love and pride can possess. In the form of the Durango Kid she thought she saw an evil being that had come grotesquely out of the night to shatter her life and take from her the only parent she had ever known.

Underneath her father's vest her small hand was clenched tight over the rounded butt of a twin-barrelled derringer which lay in a breast pocket of his woolen shirt. He was a traditional Southerner, born and raised in Louisiana, where derringers concealed in a pocket or up a sleeve were the rule rather than the exception. His carrying it was a habit with him. And it was of sufficient calibre, .32, to be exact, to kill a man at short range. The Durango Kid, a sneer on his cruel lips, a callous light in his hard eyes, hadn't the slightest inkling that her mind was made up to kill him.

"You have killed my father, Durango!" she said suddenly, and her voice was deep and vengeful. She had complete control over herself now and her every nerve was taut to the task demanded of her. She silently drew back the trigger of the derringer. There was a slight click of the oiled mechanism which was muffled by his vest and her hand. Out of the sides of her flaming eyes she watched the deputies of Burt Kelton. Only Jake Slade stood between her and the horses—Jake Slade and the Durango Kid. "You have killed my father, Durango!" she said again. "And I am going to kill you! Do you hear me, Durango? I am going to kill you as cold-bloodedly and as ruthlessly as you killed him!"

"Why, yuh little hell-cat," the Kid took a quick step forward, "fer a plugged *peso* I'd lay yuh acrosst my knee an' spank yuh!"

"Stand where you are, Durango!" she commanded. Her muscles were already bunched beneath her. Suddenly she sprang up and as she went she whipped out her father's derringer. The Durango Kid saw it instantly in the lamplight. His face went white as he crouched to spring at her. Just then Jake Slade shouted a warning and ran around the side of the house from which direction the sound of drumming hoofs beat weirdly in the night as the Jay Bar night riders swept in from the ranges. But the Durango Kid didn't hear. His entire attention was devoted to Margy Parkins. As if confident she would not shoot, he took another quick step forward, then sprang at her with outstretched arms.

Jim Parkins' blunt-nosed derringer blazed squarely into his face. A blue hole materialized between his eyes. The sound of the pistol was drowned out by the abrupt crash of a six-gun from the side of the house as the hooligans from the *Santos Rojos* opened up on the approaching twisters. From inside the house came a shout from Taos Dawson. The Durango Kid seemed to stare at her with empty bewilderment. Then his legs simply buckled under

him. Without a sound he slumped down in a heap over her father's outstretched legs.

Quick as lightning she bent down and snatched one of the Kid's heavy six-shooters from its holster. Then like a frightened deer in full flight she bounded over him and leaped toward the horses at the rack. As she went she shoved Parkins' derringer into her breeches pocket. Without waiting to snatch up the dangling reins of a tall roan that stood at the rack, she sprang into the saddle. As she whirled the horse about with knee pressure, she saw Taos appear in the doorway. Quickly she flipped up the six-gun and fired. As she did so her mount reared up and pawed at the air. That was the only thing that saved Taos Dawson's life. Her bullet smashed into the door-frame. Dawson leaped back, cursing roundly and plucking a sliver of wood from his cheek.

But he was outside in a jiffy, with drawn gun. Margy drove her heels into the roan's flanks. The beast leaped forward, stepped on one of the loose reins and almost tripped headlong. Fortunately for Margy, the rein snapped. Expecting momentarily to feel the snag of a bullet through her back, she stretched far forward over the horse's neck and gathered up the other rein. From behind her she heard the crash of a pistol. Something whined over her head and she knew that Taos Dawson was ruthlessly shooting at her. But she raced her roan pell-mell out of the yard and swung him behind the big barn. Then, gasping and sobbing, she galloped down onto the lane and sped away in the direction of El Pasos, praying that she might encounter Montana somewhere along the trail.

"She got away!" Taos swore at Burt who, with drawn guns, followed him onto the veranda. "Damn her, Bert, she'll have the whole damn kentry agin us afore long! I warn't figgerin' on lettin' her git away! Damn it!"

"What was yuh gunna do with her?" Burt's tone was uneasy and afraid.

"I was gunna ship her off t' New Mexico arter yuh got through with her!" swore Dawson. "That *tart* would have brought real *dinero* in any hombre's joint, Kelton! Durango! Where the hell air yuh?"

Around at the side of the house guns were cracking and stabbing the darkness with jets of yellow flame. From beyond the feed-lots the twisters hesitantly replied. They hadn't the vaguest idea what was going on. All they knew was that they were being fired upon. Their first thought was that rustlers had swooped down upon the Jay Bar Pee and were holed up there. Bewildered and half afraid of hitting friends, particularly Margy, her father, or Montana Larkin, they shot carefully.

"That's Durango lyin' ovah Parkins, ain't it?" said Burt suddenly. "Why, Margy musta shot him! She didn't have no gun on her, though!"

Taos was at the Kid's side in a leap. He flung the body over to look at his face.

"Deader'n hell, sheriff!" he swore. "Right atween the eyes, t'! She musta done it! She shore as the devil had a gun when she rid away! Got it from the Kid's war-bag! That's a hell o' a note! But come on! We got t' git out o'

heah pronto! No use stayin' now! We got t' git arter that Margy gal an' ketch her. Where d' yuh figger she might be a-headin'?"

"Mos' likely she'll rack inta town," Kelton said thickly.

"Then we got t' ketch her, Kelton!" stormed Dawson. "I shoulda had more sense'n t' let her out o' my sight! But hell! She won't be able t' do much, I reckon. We air the law, ain't we? Her ol' man resisted us an' we had t' let him have it, didn't we? Yuh're the sheriff! It's up t' yuh t' do the explainin'!"

A bullet from the feed-lot whistled suddenly past his face. He ducked down off the veranda and stood with the horses between him and the twisters. Kelton, unsteady as he was, lost no time in seeking the same protection from Jay Bar bullets.

"We don't want t' have t' do no explainin', Dawson!" he said. "We got t' ketch Margy. She might have heard what yuh said whilst she was fryin' them aiggs. Yuh should have kept yuhr mouth shut, Taos!"

"Shore I know it!" admitted Dawson. "I reckon I was a fool! I don't think she heard, howsomevah, but we cain't take no chances. Besides, I want that filly fer myself!"

He dodged around to the side of the house, calling Slade. Jake ran up to him with smoking gun, leaving two hooligans sprawled out in the yard behind him.

"Git the other fellers t'gether, Jake!" Dawson commanded. "We're slopin'! That damn gal got away! We got t' ketch her afore she gits into town! Git the boys an' come on!"

"What about them hombres shootin' at us?" Slade hesitated.

"The hell with 'em!" stormed Dawson. "They're Jay Bar twisters! Ef we ketch that gal, nobody'll know but what the Kid come here t' make a raid on his own hook! He's daid on the porch! It's ouah chance t' git out o' this cleah an' ef we don't take it, anything might happen t' put a crimp in my plans! Come on!"

Taos Dawson, unlike Burt Kelton, was endowed with a cunning, quick-thinking brain. He took great pride in himself for possessing those qualities and he was grinning to himself when he ducked back to the sheriff who had remained stolidly by the horses.

"They won't need t' be no explainin' done ef we kin ketch that gal, Burt!" he said, singling out his mount and snatching up the reins. "We'll jes' rack out o' heah an' let the Durango Kid take the blame. Ef we don't ketch her, I reckon it won't matter, fer yuh kin say that yuh got wind that the Kid was gonna raid the Jay Bar fer hosses an' yuh racked out jes' too late t' save Parkins! Ef Margy gits catankerous, yuh kin say that she was out o' her haid when yuh arrove an' that she mistuck yuh fer rustlers! Sabe? But we'll go arter her an' ketch her jes' t' be on the safe side. I want t' go inta town anyhow. I got business t' do with that Joe Carson galoot!"

"What business?" asked Kelton stupidly.

Dawson withdrew from his hip pocket a long, folded envelope and waved it triumphantly in the sheriff's face.

"That's the business, Burt!" he gloated. "In this envelope is the deed t' the Jay Bar Pee Ranch! I copped it out o' the safe whilst yuh jaspers was chasin' that gal when she set fiah t' the haystack! Burt, yuh're gazin' upon the new owner o' this ranch! See?"

"Nope, I don't, Taos!" mumbled Kelton. "Whatcha mean?"

"Meanin' that yuh an' me air gunna have Joe Carson register this deed in my name!" explained Dawson contentedly.

Jake Slade, followed by the others, rushed up suddenly. With the retreat of the hooligans from the side of the house, the firing ceased altogether and the Jay Bar twisters gave their attention to crawling forward. One of them lay dead, half his face torn away by a slug from Slade's own gun. Slade stepped forward.

"We're all set t' slope, boss!" he announced.

"*Bueno!*" Taos lifted his reins over his mount's head. "We ain't got no more time t' lose! Yuh take a couple o' the boys an' head straight South so's yuh'll hit the road where it makes that big turn jes' outside o' town. I reckon that gal'll come rackin' along plumb sudden. Ketch her an' wait fer the sheriff an' the rest o' us! We'll foller the road jes' in case she had a hankerin' t' pull up somewheres! *Vamoose,* Jake!"

They mounted quickly, with five riders following Slade due South. Taos and Burt led the others down the lane in a cloud of dust. Soon they were gone with the drumming of their horses' hoofs dying in the distance. The twisters rushed up with drawn guns and were amazed to find Parkins dead on the veranda. Shoving the body of the Durango Kid aside, Monte Gordon and Buff Anderson, top Jay Bar twisters, lifted the rancher up and carried him into the house.

"Them was outlaws shore as Gawd made little apples, fellers!" Anderson stated over his shoulder as they placed Parkins' stiffening body on a horse-hair couch in the parlor. "They musta bashed ol' Jay Bar's haid in with a club or somethin'! It's squashed in!"

"Gun-barrel's what did it mos' likely," commented Gordon, a tall, straight buckeroo who had once been fired off the Jay Bar by Gil Gillespie for being too honest.

"I've seen that other feller's face somewheres!" spoke up Pinto Bogue, trying hard to think where. He was a young wrangler, called Pinto because his dark hair was spotted with weird splotches of silver. Young as he was, and he was no more than twenty-five, his face showed the traces of a hard life.

They trooped out onto the veranda and dragged the Durango Kid's body into the light that flooded through the window. Gravely they scrutinized his ugly face and the small blue hole directly between his staring eyes.

"Think yuh remember him now, Pinto?" asked Shorty Catlin soberly. "Ef

we only knowed who he is we might be able t' identify the gang what left him. That's a plumb small hole in his haid, ain't it?"

"What I'm wonderin' about," put in Monte earnestly, "is where Margy is an' Montany an' the boys. The nags are gone from the corral."

"Mebbe they tuck out after them rustlers," said Anderson. " 'Pears t' me that's where they went an' whilst they were gone them same rustlers racked back here fer some reason an' killed ol' Jay Bar Parkins. This jasper an' them other two out in the yard must be members o' the gang. But who coulda killed this feller? Parkins ain't got no gun on him!"

"Ol' Jay Bar allus carried a derringer in his shirt pocket," recalled Monte. "I reckon he shot this jasper right atween the eyes. That hole ain' big enough fer a six-gun. It's a cinch the Chink couldn't have done it, because he's lyin' inside. But what become o' old Jay Bar's pop gun?"

"Might be layin' around somewheres," suggested Catlin, looking narrowly about the veranda. "Why do yuh suppose one o' this hombre's guns is missin'? A jasper jes' don't pack around a' empty war-bag! Somebody musta taken it."

"I got a hunch that only Jay Bar, Margy an' the Chink were here when them killers racked up," said Anderson quietly. "She might have taken this jasper's hogleg an' tuck a shot at somebody comin' out the door. See how the frame is splintered? I don't reckon any o' us shot at the door. We couldn't see it from where we were layin' an' it's a cinch they warn't shootin' at each other. Looked funny the way they racked off sudden-like. Wouldn't surprise me if they racked off with Margy all o' a sudden, fearin' we might see her ef we got closer. I wonder who it was that rid away as we started shootin'?"

"Mebbe we ought t' ride inta town an' git the sheriff," said Catlin.

Anderson laughed in contempt.

"Hell!" he growled. "Like as not that dirty skunk is drunk right now at the *Santos Rojos* where he hangs out! Yuh ain't been in this kentry long enough t' know what kind o' a sheriff we got, Shorty. Makes me laff t' think o' gittin' him t' do anything. Why that hombre's jes' as liable t' be in cahoots with them killers as not! He's that kind o' a hombre, Burt Kelton is. I wouldn't turn my back on him or any o' the rest o' his friends from the *Santos Rojos!*"

"That's where I saw this hombre's pan, fellers!" exclaimed Bogue suddenly. "At the *Santos Rojos!* I got it now! I heard a feller point him out last pay-day as bein' a' all-fired tough gent called the Durango Kid! This is him, shore as hell!"

"Then I reckon we don't need t' look fer no help from the sheriff!" growled Monte, scowling. "More'n likely he knows all about this raid an' killin'. Yuh shore ain't perticular where yuh do yuhr drinkin', air yuh, Pinto?"

Pinto's face reddened.

"Aw, I didn't know how rotten that joint is ontil I got inside," he explained. "I ain't been back since, but I'm goin' back sometime!"

"Why for?" scowled Anderson. "Taos Dawson trim yuh?"

"Trim me?" Bogue grunted. "He held me up with his card-sharpin'! The low-down skunk cold-decked me from the start, but I couldn't do nothin'. I started t' make holler, but when a bouncer they called Slade slammed a gun into my back I shet up damn quick! Yep! Sometime I'm goin' back there an' when I do, I'll go back a-foggin'! That's how I come t' see this Durango Kid jasper!"

"Bringin' us down t' the present, Monte," interrupted Anderson. "What are we gonna do now? Ride into Pecos or wait here fer Montana t' come back? It's a cinch we don't know where t' look for him or the other boys an' if we cain't git no help from Kelton, ain't no use in rackin' inta town."

"The only thing we can do is sit tight here an' wait for Montana," growled Monte. "Ef he's gone after them rustlers, ain't no tellin' when he'll be back or where he went. Mos' likely he's gone over the mountings toward the Los Dedos Basin, but we'd have a slim chance o' locatin' him ef we tried. We might as well stay here. He might come back pronto an' might need us. I wonder if ol' Jay Bar set fiah t' that haystack?"

"Either him or Margy done it t' call us in off'n the range," said Anderson. "Soon's it gets daylight we'll scout around there fer tracks. Reckon they'll tell who done it. Let's go inside an' sort o' clean up the place some. Looks like a bunch o' hawgs was turned loose in the dinin' room!"

"Better we leave things jes' as they are," said Monte earnestly. "When Montana comes back he might want t' look fer clues. He was a deputy sheriff hisself once an' knows the business. We might spoil his chances o' findin' out who was here."

"Reckon yuh're right," acknowledged Anderson. "We'll go out in the feed-lot an' fetch in Charlie Sloane's body. They got him right through the face whilst him an' me were creepin' up on the house. Pore jasper never knew what struck him!"

The seven of them went off the veranda and hurried across the yard toward the feed-lot where the dead Jay Bar twister had been left.

"I been thinkin'," said Monte suddenly as they went, "that mebbe them rustlers come here t' the ranch house, killed Jim Quak an' ol' Jay Bar an' then set fiah t' the haystack t' lure us in offa the range so's they could rack out there an' run off a big passel o' nags! Mebbe that's why they rid off so damn sudden, headin' South intendin' t' circle around an' git at them Morgans out on the West Fork o' Mustang Creek! I'll bet a plugged dobie dollar that's jes' what they're doin' right now!"

The entire group halted abruptly in their tracks and stared at him. None of them had thought of that before and they were quick to see the wisdom of his suggestions.

"Holy cripes!" exploded Catlin. "Why didn't we think o' that afore? We done racked in heah leavin' them nags without no pertection atall! I reckon yuh hit the nail square on the haid, Monte! I reckon we ought t' slide back there pronto!"

"Seguro!" interjected Pinto. "Sure! That's what happened! They lured us away so they wouldn't have no fight gittin' them Morgans! We'll lose our jobs plumb pronto if we let them *orejanas* pull the wool over our eyes that easy! But one o' us better stay back here in case Montana comes in! The rest o' us ought t' slope *muy pronto* back on the job!"

"I'll stay here an' wait," Anderson volunteered reluctantly. "Yuh twisters beat it back t' the herds! Soon as Montana shows up, we'll send word t' yuh."

They broke into a stiff-legged run toward their horses which they had left anchored to the ground just beyond the feed-lots. Within a moment they were racking back to their herds while Anderson brought up his own and Sloane's mount and packed the buckeroo's limp body to the house. His task done, he took his carbine from his saddle-scabbard and sat down grimly on the veranda to await developments.

CHAPTER VIII

It had been getting gray in the east for some time when Montana Larkin and Bull Tate led their cavalcade of twelve Jay Bar Pee twisters down the eastern slopes of the El Pasos and into the great fertile valley known as the Los Dedos Basin. The night had been crisp in the altitudes, but in moving swiftly along the steep Summit Trail little time had been allowed them to feel the bite of the winds that blew vagrantly down from the higher pinnacles where snow lay the year around. Night riding is hard work, particularly in the mountains. They kept warm without difficulty. Little time had been lost since leaving the Jay Bar Pee. Riding steadily they might have set a record for crossing the range, for both Montana and Tate were eager to reach the eastern side.

As expected, Montana was anxious to find the trail of the rustlers, locate the stolen horses and return to the Jay Bar as quickly as possible with them before taking leave from the ranch to assist Tate in settling the Los Dedos situation. As for Tate, he rode his borrowed Morgan gelding recklessly, sensing that the Harpers, during his absence, had jumped at the opportunity he had indiscreetly given them and had moved in on him, bag and baggage. He was well aware that if they had done so, only dynamite could have routed them from his newly-built ranch house, for the place was stocked with sufficient provisions to last indefinitely. Moreover, there was a tiny stream of fresh, cold water running almost past his front-door step. In fearing the worst, his eagerness to get back to his ranch was quite pardonable.

In the night they had not observed the burning stack in the Jay Bar feed-

lot for the simple reason that at that time they were riding deep in a ravine, hemmed in on all sides by high slopes and dense cedar thickets that shut out the Pecos Valley as effectively as if it had never existed. But as it was, however, by the time they had negotiated the ravine and followed the trail up on the higher slopes, the stack had dwindled down to a mere bed of ashes and a heavy pall of black smoke hung like a dense cloud over the lowlands. From the Summit they could see nothing below. The Jay Bar seemed buried under a black blanket and they were too high up then and too far away to have caught the smell of burning hay. They did not even know that the smoke-blanket existed; it blended so perfectly with the night.

But as they racked down out of the mountains and out onto the low-rolling Los Dedos Basin, Montana was worried. Just what made him feel uneasy he did not know. Yet somehow he had a feeling that all was not well at the Jay Bar.

Dawn broke clear and hot over the Los Dedos. Almost before they knew it the sun was up. It seemed to burst abruptly over the eastern horizon like an immense ball of yellow flame. As it came they felt an immediate rise in the temperature and they knew that before long the Basin would be sweltering under its burning heat.

The Los Dedos stretched eastward and southward as far as a horse could have been ridden in three or four days, billowing away in a vast prairie bordered on the west by the pine-clad El Pasos which gradually swung northeast in a wide crescent as if Nature, with pride in her handiwork, had flung a great arm about the land to protect it from the bitter winter winds sweeping down from the upper country. Drainage from the high ranges gave great quantities of water to the Basin, enriching its pasturage despite its seasonal heat spells. Boiling brooks rumbled down from the highlands to form the headwaters of Singing Creek which irrigated the land for many miles before taking an underground course to the Lower Pecos and the Rio Grande.

Jim Parkins could have settled there had he so desired when he trekked overland to help pioneer a new country. He had passed through the Los Dedos years before either Montana or Tate were born and viewed it with a keen eye for nature's beauty. When he passed that way, the prairies were black with immense herds of buffalo whose only enemies were the wild tribes that hunted them. He would have stopped then and there and staked out his intended Jay Bar Pee Ranch except for the fact that the buffaloes were too numerous. He did not wish to build a house and have it smashed to kindling by a herd of stampeding critters running before bands of howling Comanches. So he had gone on to settle along the Pecos where the general character of the country suited him better. There, James Barr Parkins wrought his branding iron.

Fortunate for him that he had gone on across the El Pasos, for the Jay Bar Pee in later years might have gone the way of all the other ranches that had been stocked in the Los Dedos. In those years, outlaw years, the Basin had

come under the complete domination of the lawless from all over two nations, resulting in sorrow and shattered dreams for the homesteaders who had squatted there to hack out an existence and prepare for the future. They had been hounded and rustled to the bone by the lawless until before long the land was abandoned over to the human wolves that ranged it in murdering, ravaging bands.

It was that land, or the best part of it, that Bull Tate and the Harpers were struggling for now. Despite the passing of years, the prairies were still pock-marked with old buffalo wallows which in the wet seasons filled with water and lay in miniature lakes to enrich the soil. Where once the feed had been eaten down to the roots by the vast, thundering herds, it was now knee-high in a great sea of waving grass. That was the Los Dedos Basin and Montana Larkin told himself suddenly that it was well worth fighting for.

"Finest feed I ever run across outside o' the Jay Bar ranges, Tate!" he remarked, riding Skyrocket knee-to-knee with the big man. "We shouldn't have any trouble locatin' the trail o' them rustlers if they run through the grass. I'm taking the boys out a ways on the prairie t' try t' cut the trail. Comin' along or are yuh headin' for yuhr ranch?"

"I'll rack along with yuh, Montany," said Tate. "I don't reckon yuh'll go far afore yuh hit that trail. If I'm thinkin' right, I'm thinkin' that trail'll lead us right smack up t' the Harpers! They got a couple o' brush *hogans* an' corrals a few miles south o' my place. They live like Injuns, them Harpers, an' I'd bet anything I got we'll find them nags in their corrals!"

Montana said nothing in reply. Instead he swung Skyrocket out onto the prairie, Tate riding beside him. The twisters, at a nod from their foreman, hurried away in a spreading fan in an effort to cut the trail of the rustlers.

It was Red Abbott who found it. He announced the discovery with a series of loud yip-yips that brought the others to him galloping. Montana and Tate rode up as the others converged in upon him.

"Heah she be, Montany!" the buckeroo declared excitedly. "Durn me! Them's the fust rustlers I ever heard of what left a trail that even a blind hombre could foller! Headin' south, they are, Montany!"

Montana looked carefully along the trench the stolen Morgans had made through the deep grass. The blades had not risen erect and were well-beaten down. The other twisters came galloping up, on fighting edge.

"Ef them Harpers rustled them nags," commented Tate earnestly, "its dang strange they'd leave sech a plain trail, because from what I heard tell o' them up in Colorady, they were plumb expert in runnin' off with what didn't belong t' them! I don't savvy this bunch a-tall!"

"Well, we'll soon savvy it, Tate!" spoke up Bob Maxwell ominously. "This trail is fresh an' we cain't be more'n a night behind 'em, mebbe not that long! We air gunna string up whoever rustled them hosses an' we don't give a damn whether it's the Harpers or——"

"Or me, eh, Maxwell?" Tate cut in as if reading the twister's mind. "Yuh

still think it was me that lost that letter up at Box Canyon Springs, eh? Waal, let me tell yuh somethin', Maxwell. I ain't ever been called a rustler afore by anybody an' swallered it! It's only my regard fer Parkins an' Montany that keeps me from makin' yuh eat yore own dirt!"

It was easy to see that Maxwell still considered that letter which he and Buck Daly had found on the rustlers' trail at Box Canyon Springs, concrete proof of his guilt. A twister of the old school, was Bob Maxwell. He was handed down from the era when it was a hanging offense to be caught with an extra cinch-ring cached away in a blanket-roll or saddle-bags, for such rings were generally used by cattle and horse thieves as running irons for venting, altering or any other form of illegal branding. Their eyes clashed hostilely.

"I told yuh t' keep yuhr mouth shut, Maxwell!" Montana broke in. "Dammit! Ain't I knowed Bull Tate for years an' never heard-tell o' him doin' any rustlin'? Yuh keep yuhr trap closed an' let me do the shootin' off when necessary!"

"Cain't a feller even think without gittin' his haid chawed off, Tate?" the buckeroo scowled, more than ever convinced that the big man had a guilty conscience and was trying to hide it behind a threat of gun-play and Montana's strong belief in him. A stream of bad blood seemed suddenly to come between them, widening into a great gulf as they rode swiftly in pursuit of the rustlers. Maxwell felt deep in his creaking bones that he needed look no further than Tate to find at least one of the thieves.

They could have followed the trail of the rustlers no more easily if they had possessed an illustrated map of their course. It ran due south about a mile out on the prairie, running parallel to Singing Creek and cutting a deep trench through the sea of waving grass. As they followed it Montana determined that four riders were driving the stolen Morgans. The buckeroo was quick to notice, however, that one of the mounts had suddenly lost half a shoe.

He pulled up abruptly, stepped down from Skyrocket and back-tracked on foot, scanning the ground closely as he went.

"Whatcha lookin' for, Montany?" Tate inquired casually from his horse.

"One o' them jaspers throwed part o' a shoe, Tate," the buckeroo said without looking up. "I'm aimin' t' find it. Might come in handy!"

They watched him retrace the trail a few yards then stoop down to pluck from the ground a bit of bent iron. The toe of the shoe had worn down so thin that it had broken off directly in the middle. One half of it had been pulled from the hoof by the soft earth. Montana found it sticking up sharply from the hoof-pan. He mounted Skyrocket again and rode back to the other, displaying his find.

"There she is, gents," he announced grimly. "I don't reckon the feller that lost it knows anything about it. At least that's what I'm hopin'. If them

Harpers rustled the Morgans, it won't take long t' prove it if we can get a look at their nags!"

"I don't reckon yuh'll need it, Montany," said Tate confidently. "I been sayin' all along that yuh'd find them nags in the Harper corrals! The trail is leadin' us there, directly past my place. My house is about a mile beyond that leetle rise ahead."

Maxwell glanced at him suspiciously and nodded furtively at Daly who returned it with a flick of an eye. Montana shoved the worn bit of metal into a pocket of his bat-wing chaps and spurred forward. The twisters fell in behind. Some of them, as if anticipating trouble ahead, slipped their carbines from their scabbards and rode with them balanced over their knees. Maxwell was the first to do this and had set the example for the others.

In jig-time they swung up the rise that Tate had indicated. From there they got a clear view of the country for many miles around. Like a miniature doll-house, appearing gray against a background of deep green, lay the head-quarters of Tate's Los Dedos Ranch. It was dead ahead, setting well back on comparatively high ground from Singing Creek which gleamed in the morning sun like a long ribbon of silver.

"That yuhr place, Bull?" Montana asked abruptly.

"Yep! That's it, Montany!" replied the big man. "At least it was mine when I left. Them Harpers might be in perssession o' it now! Damn 'em!"

"If they are," said the buckeroo determinedly, "we'll chase 'em out plumb pronto!"

"Easier said than done, son!" growled Tate. "Nothin' less than dynamite could git 'em out o' my place once they got in! It's built o' gravel rock from the creek, like a fort an' yuh couldn't starve 'em out because they's enough grub inside t' last a couple o' months!"

Riding knee-to-knee Montana and Tate led the cavalcade down off the rise and thundered out over the level prairie again. The trail of the rustlers was as plain as day, pointing unerringly toward the Los Dedos Ranch. Tate said nothing, but it was plain that he was worried. He sensed trouble, not so much from the Harpers, but from the high-strung twisters behind him. As they proceeded he began to take stock of things as they stood. If the Harpers had planted that letter at Box Canyon Springs where it was sure to be found by Jay Bar trailers, what was to prevent them from running the stolen horses into his own corrals so that they would be discovered there? Was that the reason for them leaving such a plain trail to be followed? Would it lead them directly to the Los Dedos corrals or would it pass close by and continue on southward to the pens of the Harpers?

He realized suddenly that if the Harpers had driven the stolen Morgans into his corrals, there would be no holding back the Jay Bar twisters from delivering quick justice. Already he sensed Maxwell's purpose in riding directly behind him with his carbine ready for any emergency. And he realized

that by planting stolen stock on his ranch, quick work on the part of the twisters would put him completely out of the Harpers' way forever.

As they approached they could not see the corrals, for they lay beyond the house which hid them from view. But from the chimney curled a tiny plume of smoke. He reasoned instantly that the Harpers had moved in during his absence and a low curse crowded through his tight-set lips.

"Somebody's there, Montany!" he growled, spurring his horse to a faster pace. "It's them Harpers shore as hell!"

"Better go careful!" warned Montana, jerking out his carbine. "They might start shootin' at us!"

But strangely no shots were flung at them from the Los Dedos ranch house. The place seemed deserted.

With his six-guns out, he thundered swiftly up to the place, Montana and the twisters in full gallop behind him. Abruptly they pulled up and gingerly walked their horses around the long, rock house. The corrals were in full view now, a hundred yards or so beyond the yard. One look at them was sufficient to tell Bull Tate that he had been framed. One glance there by the others was enough to prove the suspicions of Bob Maxwell.

Milling in Bull Tate's cedar-pole corrals were the stolen Jay Bar Morgans!

A low curse shot from Tate's clenched teeth and for an instant thereafter he sat his horse like a man in a trance. Suddenly he turned in his saddle. He found Montana staring at him accusingly, a cool look in his narrowed eyes. From the buckeroo he looked at the twisters. They glared back at him in sullen, surly silence. Maxwell's lips were curled in bitter contempt.

"Them Harpers planted them nags there, hombres—" he began abruptly to speak. "Honest t' Gawd I had nothin' ——"

"Stick 'em up, Tate!" Maxwell's carbine seemed to leap up at him. He found himself staring into its gaping muzzle. "Jes' drap yuhr hawglegs an' sit tight! Yuh're through right now, yuh dirty rustler! I knowed all along that it was yuh that lost that letter at Box Canyon an' whilst yuh was makin' a grandstand play in Pecos an' at the Jay Bar Pee, yuhr dirty rustlin' friends was a-drivin' ouah nags heah! Yuh knowed all along that we'd find 'em heah, but yuh was figgerin' on handin' us that Harper spiel an' dependin' on Montany t' git yuh cleah!"

Montana said nothing. He looked away as the twisters began mumbling dire threats. Tate had dropped his guns, the only thing he could have done unless he wanted to die then and there. Maxwell had him covered and he knew that one false move meant that the twister's ready carbine would spit certain death. He saw that the buckeroos were ripe for anything now and they did not hide their feelings. Loyal to their brand, every one of them, all they needed now to form a lynching bee was a leader. And Maxwell was that. As for Montana, he hated to believe that his old friend had turned to rustling the stock of the very people who could have aided him most in handling the

Los Dedos trouble. But the evidence seemed conclusive now, and he knew the law of the range.

"Yuh're plumb wrong, Maxwell," Tate said hotly. "I'm tellin' yuh Gawd's truth, whether yuh believe me or not, that I didn't rustle them hosses! Nor did I have any friends do it! I been runnin' this spread alone an' I ain't got no friends in the whole damn kentry 'cept mebbe Montany an' Jim Parkins!"

Maxwell laughed in derision.

"An' yuh done lost 'em now, Tate!" he jeered. "Yuh say yuh ain't got no friends, eh? 'Pears t' me yuh had some ontil they saw us comin' ovah the rise back theah an' lit out o' heah pronto leavin' a fiah goin' inside yuhr house! Yuh're jes' like a lot o' them lowdown nestors—startin' yuhr ranch on somebody else's stock! Waal, yuh'll nevah use them Morgans fer a *remuda*, Tate, because they hain't no keows in hell! That's where yuh're headin' right now! *Sabe amigo?*"

Quick-tempered, the twisters began edging up at him. Suddenly a loop hissed through the air from the back of the bunch and settled unerringly over his shoulders. It was jerked tight instantly and Bull Tate realized that he was as close to death as he had ever been before. He looked helplessly at Montana. The buckeroo's lips were pursed tight and his eyes were fixed on the horn of his saddle.

"I ain't askin' yuh t' interfere with these hombres, Montany," the big man said quietly. "I don't reckon I kin blame 'em a damn bit, because it shore looks bad. I'd feel the same in their boots. But I'm tellin' yuh Gawd's truth that I don't know how them nags got in my corral onless the Harpers planted 'em there! Yuh kin let these jaspers string me up ef yuh want, but sometime yuh'll find out that they made a mistake an'll kick yuhrself fer not acceptin' my word! Hell! Ef I was a rustler, do yuh think I'd be sech a damn fool as t' drive them nags here, leavin' a trail a feller could follow with his eyes shet?"

"Yuh're jes' a rank amatoor, Tate!" countered Maxwell. "I have seen yuhr kind work afore an' we air gunna string yuh up afore yuh graduate inta the expert class!"

The noose was jerked tighter about his neck, almost pulling him from his horse. He looked once more at Montana. The buckeroo maintained his stoic silence and avoided his eyes. He felt deep down in his heart that Tate was innocent, yet there was the proof of his guilt in his own corrals! And there was the letter! He glanced covertly at Tate and found the big man staring at him with a look of warm affection and injured pride.

"Ain't yuh got nothin' t' say, Montany?" he said quietly, expectantly.

"Don't start appealin' t' Montany, hombre!" Maxwell spoke up ruthlessly. "It won't do yuh no good! Montany stuck by yuh ontil we proved yuh up! He's done with yuh now! Cain't yuh see it?"

"Nope, Tate," the buckeroo said finally. "I reckon I ain't, 'cept that I

didn't think yuh'd bite the hand that could've fed yuh! I'm plumb sorry, Bull!"

There was a large cottonwood standing midway between the house and the corrals. Tate knew that it was useless to struggle as they herded him toward it. Montana remained behind, choosing to maintain a hands-off policy, feeling that if he was not obligated to aid a rustler he could at least refuse to lend a hand in his hanging. But it ran against his finer qualities to remain behind. He owed his life to Bull Tate and would never refuse to recognize the fact. To have helped him now would have brought him scorn and disrespect. That part did not seem to matter. He owed a debt that had never been paid. But could he settle it now and ever be able to live it down in the eyes of honest men? He groaned and looked away as the loose end of the riata was tossed over a spreading branch of the cottonwood. He heard the low hiss of the rope. It made him flinch. Still he refused to look toward the tree. He couldn't look and through the eyes of an ingrate watch them put his friend to death.

Suddenly he heard the sharp slap of a hand on a horse's rump. He knew instantly what it meant. He had witnessed range hangings before. A rope about his neck, Tate's horse had been driven out from under him, leaving him swaying in the air. Shouts went up instantly from the twisters. Hard, callous shouts that were interspersed with curses. Then he could stand it no longer. His .45 was out in a flash of speed that would have defied the eye. It exploded with a crash that echoed out over the prairie. As clean as if it had been cut with a knife, the rope parted within a foot of Tate's head. The big man dropped to the ground, gasping for breath. The twisters stared down at him, speechless.

Like a cyclone Montana thundered up, sliding Skyrocket to a halt. He was at Tate's side in a trice, his gun aimed at the twisters. His face was a colorless mask. No emotion was there, no feeling. By his actions he knew he would forever be an outcast, scorned by honest men. He knew that better than anybody.

"Hombres!" he said, and his voice was as frigid as his emotionless face. "Bull Tate saved my life once and I'm savin' his right now regardless. I don't give a damn what folks say about me helpin' a rustler! I don't give a damn for anything except that if yuh hang Bull Tate yuh hang me with him—if yuh've got the guts t' try it! Have you, Maxwell? An' yuh, Daly? Come on! I'm waitin'!"

The twisters eyed him with a mixture of contempt and resentment. They made no move however. Maxwell spoke first.

"Have yuh gone crazy, Montany?" he inquired tensely. "What'll ol' Jay Bar an' Margy say when we tell her yuh throwed in lock, stock an' barrel with a bunch o' damned rustlers?"

"I ain't gone crazy, Maxwell," said Montana frigidly, his gun trained on Maxwell's third vest-button. Tate coughed, spat huskily and stood up, slipping the noose from his rope-burned throat, "an' I ain't throwed in with no

rustlers!" the buckeroo continued. "But I'm standin' by Tate t' pay my debt t' him an' because I don't believe he rustled them Morgans!"

"But good Gawd, son," Maxwell argued, "what more proof do yuh want? Theah was that lettah an' heah air the nags in his corral!"

"I know that, Maxwell!" the buckeroo foreman flung back. "But it's gettin' plainer every minute that he was framed by somebody! Besides, afore we jump at conclusions we ought t' find the jasper that lost that half a hoss shoe! I made up my mind that Tate an' me are gonna ride over t' Harper's ranch an' take a look at their nags. I reckon if we find the one that throwed the iron, we'll know who put the Morgans in that corral!"

Maxwell frowned.

"I reckon that hoss was rid by one o' Tate's friends, that's what!" he snapped. "But we like yuh, Montany, an'd go through hell an' high watah fer yuh. Ef it'll make yuh feel bettah, we'll jes' trail that hoss with yuh an' see for ouahselves, an' I'm tellin' yuh right now, son, that ef it don't produce the guilty jaspers we'll hang Tate plumb pronto. That fair enough, Tate?"

"Ef that nag don't produce a Harper, I'll hang m'self!" avowed Tate bluntly. "I ain't got no fear that it won't!"

He rubbed his rope-burned neck gently, looking at Montana through grateful eyes. Except for strangulation and the burn of the hemp about his throat, he suffered little from his experience. He held no malice for the quick-tempered twisters because he, also, knew the unwritten law of the range. He had been caught red-handed with the stolen horses in his corrals. The twisters were blameless though they might have investigated further.

CHAPTER IX

SUDDENLY from toward the south they heard the thud of many hoofs beating down the high grass of the prairie. Automatically their sharp eyes detected a large knot of men riding out of a coulee not more than a quarter of a mile away. There was something grim and ominous in the way they advanced and in the glare of the sun Tate strained his eyes to recognize the leaders. Abruptly his face clouded and a bitter curse leaped from his tight-drawn lips.

"It's Kiowa Harper an' a bunch o' Mex vaqueros, Montany!" he thundered. "I smell trouble!"

He made a quick dive for his twin-sixes that lay on the hard-packed ground in the yard. Maxwell had been watching him covertly for just such a move while the others regarded the approaching riders. Even Montana's eyes were

glued on the advancing men. As if expecting Tate to make a dive for his guns, Maxwell was ready. His .45 was out in a flash and hurling lead. The crash of the gun sounded almost in Montana's ear. Tate pulled up in his tracks as a slug plowed a furrow in the ground in front of him.

"No yuh don't, Tate!" Maxwell bellowed suspiciously. "Git away from them guns ontil we see who's rackin' up heah! We ain't takin' no chances on them bein' yuhr rustler friends! Ef they air, it'll be jes' too bad fer yuh, mister! We'll git yuh fust off!"

Bull Tate was genuinely infuriated now at Maxwell. Why couldn't the old twister at least once give him the benefit of all doubt?

"I tell yuh them Harpers are comin'!" he thundered, standing with his legs straddling his .45's. "Them buzzards are liable t' start shootin' pronto an' I'm unarmed! Put up yuhr gun, hombre! I'm givin' yuh fair warnin'!"

Maxwell laughed ominously.

"Yuh're takin' orders from me, Tate!" he said. "Git away from them guns!"

Before Montana could interfere, it happened. He had not been altogether blind to the simmering blood-feud that had suddenly sprung up between Tate and the old twister. Why, he could not tell unless the old buckeroo was just over-cautious and suspicious. But it all happened in a twinkling of an eye and Bull Tate showed the Jay Bar twisters suddenly just why the superstitious Mexicans along the border call him Señor Satan.

Literally courting death from Maxwell's threatening pistol he made a quick dive to the ground. Maxwell's pistol blazed once more and the slug sent a geyser of dirt almost into Tate's angry face. Before the old twister could fire again, Tate's big hand closed over one of his fallen .45's and whipped it up. His slug smashed so violently into Maxwell's body that it jarred his hat from his head. His gun flew from his hand. He whirled backward and fell flat on his face, stretched out full length.

"I've tuck from yuh hombres all I'm gonna take!" Tate leaped up, menacing all but Montana with his six-shooters. "I was even willin' t' let yuh try hangin' me t' convince yuh that I ain't no rustler! Ef them Harpers rack up here an' find me unarmed, my life won't be wuth a plugged peso! An' git this inta yuh're thick skulls! Yuh better fergit about me right now an' watch out fer yuhrselves! I'm tellin' yuh them Harpers are a breed o' hell an' there ain't nothin' they won't do ef it's t' their gain! I got a hunch they air after them horses an' they'll take 'em ef they have t' kill every damn one o' yuh!"

The twisters were stricken speechless by the swift, unexpected death of Bob Maxwell. But abruptly they began mumbling dire threats among themselves, resenting whole-spiritedly that Maxwell had, in their honest opinion, been killed by a rustler. They began secretly to blame Montana for it for his unethical interference with the hanging. But before they had time to get thoroughly aroused, the riders thundered up.

They were twenty in number and no more murderous-looking outfit had Montana or any of the twisters ever seen before. Only one of them could

have been considered a white man. He was old Kiowa Harper, a great hulk of a man around sixty with a stubble of gray beard on his leathery face and a drooping, tobacco-stained mustache that gave him the facial aspect of a grizzled walrus. There was nothing clean about his make-up. He was dressed in a dirty, tattered buckskin shirt, as greasy as his long beak of a nose which could easily have been mistaken in the dark for the snout of a hog. He rode his horse, hunched far over his saddle-horn, as if his backbone was too weak to support his ponderous chest. His great head was bare and his white hair flowed down over his shoulders in dirty gray knots. As for eyes, they matched his nose. They were large and wicked with a habit of casting furtive glances.

A renegade white man was the buckeroo's first thought, a mean, nondescript squaw-man such as he had encountered before up in the Big Horn country where he had been born and reared. He knew him from Tate's descriptions the instant he laid eyes on the man.

Old Harper had married into the Kiowa tribe and his sons showed the mixture of blood as plain as day. They all looked a great deal like him and the buckeroo realized abruptly that Lafe had been no exception. But none of them had their father's bulk, yet they were strapping big enough to draw comment anywhere. As Tate had told him, Rufe Harper was the smallest of the lot. He had a wild, untamed look in his eyes. An imbecile, Tate had said. And he looked it. His lower lip hung open constantly. But what struck Montana most in him was that he was stark naked except for a filthy breechclout that hung loose about his sallow loins. As if he had more red blood than white in him, all he needed to make him an Indian was a feather stuck in his straight black hair. He carried, however, the latest model 30-30 carbine over his calloused knees and about his waist hung an Indian belt of bright beads to which was fixed a beaded knife-scabbard. For a blade he carried a heavy butcher knife with a handle of wrapped buckskin.

A treacherous-looking customer was Rufe Harper, with his long knife and his strange look. He was no more than twenty-two or three, Montana decided, but he looked perfectly capable of anything that might come under the category of crime. Gabe Harper, the eldest, and Jess, might have been twins. Yet they differed from Rufe in that they looked perfectly sane. Their eyes were hard and large, like the old man's. They wore the usual range garb. They were five or six years older than Rufe and they had that same wild look in their faces which, due to the mixture of blood in their veins, were a sallow yellow. They rode excellent horses of the Morgan breed and they were armed to the teeth. The only hair on their faces was on their pointed chins. It was just a dark fuzz and no more.

Directly behind them, with his elbow resting on his saddlehorn was the lawyer who had been with Joe Carson in the Red Onion when Tate had killed Lafe Harper. As if afraid to come forward, he remained in the background, between the four Harpers and fifteen hard-eyed Mexican *vaqueros* who had ridden up with them. They might have stepped out of a revolution

in Manana Land to pay a visit to the Los Dedos. Each one of them wore twin bandoliers of rifle cartridges slung across their torsos. Gayly dressed in the approved Mexican fashion, they seemed anything but friendly.

As Montana and his twisters turned to face the Harpers, Tate snapped his .45's into their holsters and stepped forward gingerly. His eyes were hard, deadly, and his lips were parted in a withering smile. Before he could give vent to the black oath that crammed his throat, Kiowa Harper spoke.

"What's goin' on yere?" he demanded in a hostile tone that sounded like the low growl of a cornered wolf. At the same time he thrust his rifle forward across his horse's neck. "You buckeroos was hangin' a lowdown hoss thief! Whyn't yuh go ahead? Or wuz you waitin' fer weuns t' come along an' he'p?"

"Yuh keep out o' this, Harper!" Montana flung back. "How'd yuh know we was hangin' a hoss thief, eh?"

Harper cleared his great throat and spat. A stream of tobacco juice sailed through the air and landed within an inch of Montana's boot-toe. The three sons grinned at that.

"Yuh missed thet time, pap!" said Rufe abruptly. His voice was high-pitched and sharp, almost hysterical. "Watch me!"

He puckered up his loose lips deliberately and spat. The ugly stream splattered squarely on the buckeroo's boot. Montana Larkin would have shot Rufe Harper to death just then if Tate had not grabbed him by the arm. The Harpers laughed with great amusement.

"Take it easy, son," the big man warned. "These swine are lookin' fer a fight! Let me handle this."

Scowling like a thunderstorm, Montana dropped his hand away from his gun and looked up at Kiowa Harper. Just then he knew why Tate had held his arm. Harper's carbine was carelessly aimed right at his head.

"Harper!" Tate stepped hotly between them. "What yuh doin' on my land?"

"Yore land?" Harper tilted back his shaggy head and laughed. He sobered abruptly and glared down at his interrogator. "We hev' come t' kill ye, Tate, fer killin' my son, Lafe, in Pecos! Now don't deny ye did it! Dave Snapes wuz there! Come for'ard, Snapes! Is this the whelp what killed Lafe Harper?"

His knees trembling against his saddle skirts, the lawyer spurred forward, looked at Tate and nodded.

"That's the man, Kiowa!" he said in a low, trembling voice. "Me an' Joe Carson saw him! Tate an' this buckeroo ganged up on him!"

"That's anough, Snapes!" thundered Harper. "Yore word is all we want!" He turned abruptly to his three murderous offspring. "B'ys," he said, "there's the whelp what killed Lafe! Them buckeroos ain't got the guts t' hang 'im! What ye say we spread him out on a cross-tree an' skin the livin' hide offa his bones?"

"Let's burn'm at the stake, pap!" put in Rufe viciously. "Yuh know how they squirm an' wiggle when the fire begins eatin' in t' the marrer! Jes a leetle fire, pap, an' make it last a heap o' time! Ain't no hurry in killin' him!"

"That ain't a bad idee, Rufe!" laughed Jess, thrusting his rifle forward toward the buckeroos. "They call him *Señor Satan,* eh? Waal, I reckon we kin send him back t' hell a-fittin' the devil!"

"Jes' a minute, yuh!" Tate was crouched now in front of them, his big fists curling like talons over the black butts of his six-guns. "Afore yuh start shootin' an' killin', I want yuh t' tell these twisters somethin'. Like as not yuh know better than anyone what we want t' know. Who druv' them Morgan nags inta my corral?"

The Harpers exchanged quick glances and laughed among themselves. Snapes, afraid of gun-play, retreated to the background. The vaqueros sat their horses stoically.

"Four o' yuhr rustlin' friends druv' 'em in last night, Tate!" Jess Harper replied, watching the faces of the buckeroos for the effect. He saw them turn on Tate viciously and grinned. "We saw 'em! We kep' a watch on yuhr place. Yuhr friends holed up here all night. When they seed yuh comin' this mornin', they lit out pronto!"

"Yuh're a liar, Jess Harper!" Tate swore furiously, aware that he was fighting for his life now between two fires. "Yuh dirty *orejanas* stole them Jay Bar horses an' planted 'em here! Yuh planted a fire in my shack t' make it look like I had some friends that sloped when these twisters rode up, didn't yuh? Why, yuh dirty snakes! I got it all figgered out an' I'm gonna prove right now jes' what I said!"

"I reckon we kin let yuh spiel like that a spell, Tate!" said Gabe coldly. "We're gonna kill yuh anyhow! Go ahead an' talk! Yuh ain't got much time!"

"No?" Tate was ready for them, and so was Montana. The buckeroos were beginning to shift suspiciously now. Hands dropped down to gun-butts. They sensed a new turn of affairs, mixed with plenty of trouble. "I want yuh t' answer one more question, Harpers!" he added. "Jes' one more, an' then I'm gonna prove t' these buckeroos jes' who rustled them Jay Bar nags!"

"Go ahead an' ask, Tate!" said Kiowa Harper ruthlessly.

"Right!" Tate thundered. "What I want t' know is—are yuh an' yuhr three lousy brats any friends o' mine?"

"Friends o' ye'rn?" Kiowa almost split his sides. "Why, we're gunna kill yuh, Tate! We'd ruther hev' a snake fer a friend than yuh!"

"Bueno!" Tate roared. "Heah that, yuh Jay Bar twisters? These four swine ain't no friends o' mine! Yuh could see that with a blind eye! I reckon now yuh'll believe me when I say no friends o' mine ever stole them nags! I ain't got any friends! But ef yuh'll look at the left front hoof o' young Harper's dirty pinto hoss, yuh'll see who druv' them nags heah! Gents, Rufe Harper's paint nag done lost half a shoe which half is now in Montany's chaps pocket!"

Buckeroo eyes went to the designated hoof. Rufe's pinto was pawing the ground viciously to rid itself of the other half of the broken shoe! Montana did not look. He did not need to, for he saw the Harpers exchange quick

glances and start backing away. He took a quick step up beside Tate and stood ready. The buckeroos edged up to them.

"Git ready t' bust inta my shack soon's they start shootin', Montany!" the big man hissed out of the side of his mouth. "I reckon we called 'em cold that time! We got 'em an' they know it! They're gunna start shootin' any minute now!"

"Let 'em, Bull!" Montana growled. "I reckon me an' my twisters can handle this bunch o' swine! Them greasers look ready t' run!"

But the shooting did not begin just when they expected it. Old Kiowa Harper had something to say.

"Tate," he said coolly. "We might let ye off fer the time bein' on one condition. These *vaqueros* hev' come up frum Del Rio with a thousand head o' crittahs which-all they say yuh ordered down there, t' be paid for on delivery. Like as not ye know, our ranch lays on all four sides o' yuh'n. Them crittahs had t' be driv' over our land! We got 'em in our corrals right now, but air willin' that these *vaqueros* herd 'em up here providin' ye pay us right now an' here, ten pesos a head fer 'lowin' 'em t' cross our land! Ef ye don't we'll jes' keep them damn crittahs ontil ye do, an' we ain't payin' these greasers either, which-all is ye're owin' becus they hev' done their part! Ef ye don't pay 'em fer them cattle, they'll blast ye t' hell an' back!"

Tate was flabbergasted by the infernal nerve of the old reprobate. It was as plain as the nose on his face that the Harpers were trying to find out where he kept the money with which to pay for the stock on delivery. They must have known he had some somewhere, or he would not have ordered stock C.O.D. But ten thousand dollars for the privilege of driving a thousand head of cattle over forbidden ground? He had to laugh outright at the very suggestion of it.

"Kiowa Harper!" he shouted back. "Yuh're an' old fool! Do you think I'm crazy? Even if I was loony enough t' pay yuh, I know damn well them cows' never set foot on the Los Dedos Ranch! Yuh know that yuhrself, yuh dirty old crook! Yuh kin go plumb t' hell an' keep them cows as far as I'm concerned!" He swung abruptly on the *Mexicanos* and spoke to them in their own lingo. "Hombres!" he called to them. "I ordered them cows payable on delivery right in my corrals! Yuh don't get a red cent ontil every last one o' them is where they belong!"

A Mexican spurred his horse forward, holding up his hand for a pow-wow.

"Senor," he said in Spanish, "was I not present when you ordered the cattle? You remember me, eh?"

"Shore, I remember yuh, Pedro!" Tate called to him. "What o' it?"

"Is it not so, Senor Satan," the Mexican continued, "that you ordered the cattle to be paid for when they reach the Los Dedos Basin? Is it not so, Senor?"

"That's right, Pedro!" growled Tate. "That's what I said! But the Los Dedos is a hundred miles any way yuh look! Yuh know damn well I meant

I'd pay up when yuh delivered them on the Los Dedos Ranch! That was the bargain, an' I'm stickin' t' it! No cows in my corrals, no pesos for Pedro and his vaqueros t' take back t' Del Rio! Sabe?"

The Mexican scowled murderously.

"Yuh heard me, Pedro!" Tate thundered. "No cattle in my corrals, no *dinero* for yuh! That's plain, ain't it?"

"Very plain, Senor Tate!" the *vaquero* asserted. "It is a dirty trick, Senor! Too dirty, after all the hard work of trail herding! Very plain, Senor Satan, and we will see you in hell before we let you get away with a dirty trick like that!"

Even as he finished his pearl-handled six-shooter flicked out. Montana had been watching for it. His .45's crashed in his hands. The *vaquero* tumbled from his saddle and lay still. A bullet from Kiowa Harper's rifle fanned his face. The Mexicans jerked out their guns and started firing. The twisters lost no time in getting into action. The Harpers, waiting for a chance to warm up their guns, jumped in.

Shooting like a madman, Tate pumped lead into both the Mexicans and the Harpers. Jess Harper took one of his slugs squarely in the jaw. Montana saw it happen. His lower face seemed to leap away from the rest of his head. He threw up his arms and tumbled from his saddle. With a bellow of fury old Kiowa started to ride them down with his pitching stallion. Red Abbott knocked the horse from under him. Harper, old as he was, landed on both feet and ran into the deep grass where he was instantly swallowed up. Gabe and Rufe followed after him quickly. The Mexicans retreated back out of six-gun range and took to their rifles. Snapes spurred into the grass like a scared jackrabbit.

CHAPTER X

IN THAT scant minute of deadly fighting, death held high carnival on the Los Dedos Ranch. Bull Tate himself had dropped four Mexicans with as many shots. Montana drew one, and Jess Harper lay dead close by. Long Tom Jenkins, a Jay Bar twister, was sprawled out in mortal agony. With his left arm hanging limp, Red Abbott hurried toward the house and its protection.

"Beat it fer the house, Montany!" Tate urged suddenly. "When them greasers get started with their smoke-poles, we'll be picked off like flies out here! Grab yuhr carbines from yuhr hosses as yuh go! I'll fetch Jenkins inside!"

Montana and his twisters needed no further urging to retreat houseward. Already rifle bullets were droning about them from the Harpers and the *vaqueros*. Snatching their rifles from their saddles, they ran hastily into the cabin. Red Abbott had already pushed open the door. They found him sitting dazedly in a hand-made chair. Blood was dripping from his shattered arm, creating a spreading pool on the earthen floor.

Outside Tate gathered the tall form of Jenkins in his strong arms and literally ran with him toward the house. Bullets whined perilously close to him. Suddenly he heard the ugly thud of lead smacking into flesh and bone. Long Tom Jenkins' body became suddenly limp in his arms. He carried him into the house and laid him gently on the floor.

"I reckon he's done fer, Montany," he said grimly. "Got him again whilst I was packin' him in!"

Montana said nothing, but the bitter look in his eyes spoke louder than words. Grimly he gripped his carbine and stepped quickly to a window facing the direction from which they had come, hoping for a glimpse of the Harpers in the tall grass. The twisters were quick to follow his example, all except Red Abbott who had tied his *reboso* around his arm above the wound and sat twisting it with his six-gun to stop the flow of blood. A bullet had ripped through his biceps close to the crotch of his elbow, partly severing an artery.

Tate's ranch house was not unlike many to have been found in the vicinity of the El Pasos then. It had one long room stoutly built of cedar-poles with the thick ends embedded firmly in the ground. These formed a strong framework for the veneer of rock on the outside. The roof was low and covered with hand-split shakes. A large fireplace stood at one end of the room. It was of rock, chinked with mud and tough reed. Mexican fashion. Tate evidently had built his house with an eye for impregnability, for dazed as he was Abbott was quick to acknowledge that nothing less than dynamite could have jarred it from its foundations. There were two windows on either side and at each end. At these the twisters took up their posts and watched. No glass to be bothered with there. Tate had not yet reached the stage of having paned windows. Instead, gunny sacks took their place. These were pulled aside to give the besieged men full view of the prairie on all sides.

"Them greasers are shore sore at me, Montany!" remarked Tate, stepping up to the buckeroo and thrusting his rifle over the window sill. "I reckon they figger that ef they cain't pull my leg fer the price o' them ceow-critters which ain't been delivered accordin' t' the bargain, they'll take it out on my hide! Waal—let 'em try it! Damn funny how they 'lowed them Harpers t' corral that stock thataway!"

"Mebbe Harper bought 'em off or showed 'em t' make more money by chargin' yuh a toll," grunted Montana, stealing a quick glance out over the prairie. He ducked back none too soon, for a bullet whistled through the window and splattered with a thud into a cedar-pole on the opposite side of the room. Quick as a flash Tate flung up his rifle and sent hot lead winging

toward a spot in the high grass where Gabe Harper had appeared, fired and dodged down out of sight again.

Lead began drumming on the cabin as the *vaqueros,* angry because they thought they had been cheated, settled down to lay a siege on the place. They had retreated steadily until now they lay just behind the rim of a low coulee about a hundred yards from the house. Their horses were out of sight in the bottom behind them. Bullets clipped through the deep grass steadily for a moment, then ceased as if they suddenly recognized the waste in shooting at the rocks.

Like Indians, the Harpers kept out of sight in the grass. They seemed to move constantly from one place to another without creating the slightest disturbance in that sea of rolling green. Suddenly old Kiowa popped up himself close to the clearing about the cabin. They caught only a fleeting glimpse of him as he fired and dodged back out of sight. His slug sang harmlessly through the window. But the instant he ducked out of sight, Montana and Tate peppered the spot, shooting blind. Whether they scored a hit they could not tell.

The twisters watching out over the hidden Mexicans began suddenly to shoot. Rusty Logan stood up at the window and emptied his carbine at the coulee and was rewarded when one of his slugs found a mark in a floppy sombrero. The Mexican threw up his arms, yelled once and tumbled over backward into the coulee.

"Knock 'em off, fellers!" Tate urged, ominously. "Give 'em holy hell an' make 'em like it! We got t' whip 'em afore night or they're liable t' sneak up on us an' try t' smoke us out!"

"I was thinkin' the same thing," said Montana grimly. "It wouldn't be very hard t' fire yuhr roof! Them shakes'd go like tinder! Bein' part Injun, it's a wonder them Harpers haven't tried shootin' a burnin' arrow into them shingles!"

Suddenly Montana detected a movement in the grass in front of him. He nudged Tate who abruptly stepped back and threw his rifle to his shoulder. Out near the movement stood a lone horse. They watched the grass move unnaturally contrary to the direction of the wind and then suddenly a man stood up and made a dive for the horse.

"It's that shyster lawyer from Pecos, Tate!" Montana grunted.

"Waal—" and Tate's carbine roared, "he's done shysterin' from now on onless he does it in hell, Montany!"

Snapes halted dead in his tracks, thrust a hand up to the side of his shattered head and fell forward. His horse shied off, ran away a couple of hundred yards and started grazing. The mounts of the Harpers had drifted off and were feeding unconcernedly just beyond range. Rufe's painted pinto looked like an Indian pony grazing on the prairie, its tail and mane whipping in the wind. But of Rufe himself they saw nothing. He might not have been there.

"I'd like t' lay my sights on that whelp o' a Rufe!" said Montana abruptly.

"Crazy as a loon, that varmint is! I've seen his kind up in Montana. There's nothin' worse than a crazy breed! They like t' kill jes' t' see a man fall an' spill blood. That Rufe ain't no exception, or I miss my guess!"

"He ain't only insane, Montany," said Tate, "but he's sex-crazy t' boot! No woman'll be safe in the Los Dedos Basin as long as that whelp is rangin' like a huntin' wolf. Hell! Ef I was the daddy o' a loon like that, I'd kill it pronto!"

"I don't reckon ol' Kiowa can see jes' how bad he is," commented the buckeroo.

"Don't kid yuhrself, Montany!" Tate scowled. "Harper has had his hands full with that whelp, accordin' t' what I heard up in Colorady. Rufe an' that Durango kid is a fine pair, allus lookin' fer some woman t' rape. They'd a hung Rufe up No'th ef he hadn't had the pertection o' the Injuns. Yuh see, the varmints look on a crazy buck as bein' perssessed with pow'ful medicine."

There was not a sign of life anywhere on the open prairie now, except for the grazing horses. The Harpers might have deserted the fight and were hiding out in wait for a chance to reach their mounts. The Mexicans fired only an occasional shot and Montana began reasoning that their hearts were not in the battle. He went to a window from where he could look out over the coulee. The prairie in that direction seemed vacant of any living thing.

"Them greasers are up t' somethin', Montana," said Rusty grimly. "Mebbe they'll make a charge!"

"Ef they do," put in Sam Culver, "I won't be able t' git more'n three o' them. I'm out o' ca'tridges for my 30-30."

"Don't worry none about that, amigo," Tate, having overheard, stepped forward. "I got plenty cached away right here in the shack!"

He went to a cupboard along the wall, moved aside several tomato cans and produced four boxes of 30-30's and as many .45's. Breaking them open he laid them on the table.

"Help yourselves, gents," he invited. "I reckon we got a heap more ca'tridges than we have greasers t' shoot at! I wouldn't throw none away, however."

The twisters looked at him gratefully and helped themselves to the shells.

"Yuh don't seem t' be sech a bad hombre, Tate," said Rusty in an apologetic tone. "Co'se we was plumb sore at yuh fer shootin' Bob Maxwell, but I reckon yuh done right. Ain't no doubt now who rustled them nags."

"Fergit it, Logan!" Tate grunted, jamming a couple of cartridges into the breech of his carbine. "Ever'body makes mistakes sometimes! I don't hold no grudge! Fergit it! Let's see what them greasers are doin'!"

He went quietly to the window and peered out across the prairie. Just then Sam Culver who happened to glance out toward the corrals, let out a sharp whoop and snapped up his rifle. Twice he fired in rapid succession and through the smoke of his hot rifle saw a Mexican pitch forward on his face and lay still.

"They're after them Morgan nags!" he shouted excitedly. "Get 'em! They

got the corral bars down an' they's a greaser inside tryin' t' haze the hosses out!"

Tate and Montana were beside him in quick leaps. At a glance they summed up the situation. Several of the Mexicans had slithered like snakes through the grass to the corrals. One of them was now in the corral exciting the Morgans into stampeding out on the prairie while another was letting down the lowest bar. The third lay close by, sprawled on his face. "Give 'em hell, Montany!" Tate roared. "Them greasers must be figgerin' t' slope south with them nags! Reckon they think they're mine an' aim' t' take 'em in payment fer their work in trail-herdin' up here!"

Montana needed no urging to get into action. With a quick snap shot he sent the *vaquero* at the bars sprawling. Tate held his fire until he was sure of not striking one of the Morgans. Suddenly the Mexican in the corral bolted in panic through the bars and made for the grass like a frightened rabbit. Calmly Tate pulled down on him and shot him in the back.

"Reckon that'll teach 'em t' stay in their shells!" he said. "We caught 'em jes' in time, Montany! That Mex didn't get the last bar down an' it's high enough t' keep them nags in the corral! They better not try that again!"

From the other side of the cabin the Harpers began shooting again. Bullets plunked into the cedar-poles. Tate leaped back to his window. But the green sea of grass had swallowed up the Harpers before he even had a glimpse of them. Growing bold and contemptuous of the poor shooting of the Mexicans, Rusty stood up before the window overlooking their hideout and defied them to show themselves. Montana yelled at him to keep back, but before the words left his mouth, the twister reeled backward with half of his face torn away by a chewed dum-dum.

Thoroughly angered, the twisters poured lead in the direction of the coulee, shooting low down so that their bullets clipped through the grass. The volley bore fruit when two *vaqueros* stood up simultaneously. Before they fell, however, Montana and Culver planted messengers of death into them from their own hot rifles. Then the buckeroo stepped back to check up more carefully on Rusty. The sight made Montana flinch. He spread Rusty's *reboso* over his bloody features and turned away as Tate, watching out for a chance glimpse of one of the Harpers, saw old Kiowa in the grass and took a snap shot at him.

"I got him, Montany!" the big man shouted with sudden glee. "I got him! Damn his hide! Two more o' them an' the whole damn tribe'll be on its way t' their Happy Huntin' Grounds! Son, I ain't ever been much fer notchin' my guns, but dang me, them Harpers is wuth a notch! Where's my durn knife! I'm cuttin' three o' them right now!"

The big clasp knife was snatched out of his pocket and opened with his thumb-nail. Quickly he notched the stock of his carbine three times and held it up for the buckeroo to see.

"I'm gonna put two more on there, Montany, afore this day is done!" he

swore. "All I ask is fer that Gabe an' that whelp o' a Rufe t' gimme a fair target! The dirty, thievin' scuts!"

It was well after noontime now and the prairie dazzled and danced under the gloating heat of the boiling sun. Not a cloud marred the blue sky overhead and the wind had long since died down. The high grass stood motionless and seemed to be withering under the heat. The only sign of life out there were the close-bunched mounts of the Harpers. They seemed to be grazing now directly along the trail the rustlers had stamped down previously in driving the stolen Morgans to the Los Dedos.

Weak from the loss of blood, Red Abbott lay on a bunk and slept. The bleeding had stopped long since, but his pale face betrayed his weakness. Montana, time after time, soaked up his *reboso* in cool water taken from a tiny stream that trickled almost past the front door, and bathed his feverish forehead. He took his life in his hands twice to fill a water-bucket, but fortunately for him the *vaqueros* either had not observed him crawl into the open, or were enjoying a *siesta* out there in the coulee. For half an hour or so no shots had been fired by either side and the twisters had begun to think that the Mexicans had somehow moved out without being seen. That would not have been altogether impossible because they could have ridden down the bottom of the coulee and on south beyond a low rise that gradually sloped down to the east bank of Singing Creek.

The Harpers seemed to be present, however, as attested by their horses plainly visible from the cabin. They seemed to be playing a waiting game and, like the Mexicans, were staked out at points of advantage, holding their fire until sure of scoring a direct hit. As far as the twisters were concerned, it was no longer a question which side could hold out the longest. It was a question of how soon they could get out of there and head back to the Jay Bar Pee. To them the fight was becoming monotonous inasmuch as now there was insufficient action to keep them awake. They dozed at their posts, though Montana and Tate kept on the alert. The vaqueros made no further attempt to bother the Morgans in the corral.

"I'm gittin' tired o' doin' nothin' here, Montany," said Tate exasperatedly. "Them damn skunks out there are waitin' fer nightfall t' either git away or sneak up on us!"

"Well," grunted the buckeroo, "what can we do about it? Shore thing if we go outside an' expose ourselves, they'll start pluggin' away at us! I don't like the idea o' sittin' here either, but I can't see nothin' we can do. Come night and they stick on our tails, we'll at least be able t' see their gun-flashes an' have somethin' t' shoot at!"

"Ef I could only git a couple o' shots at them two Harpers!" Tate moaned.

"Yuh think they'll keep on fightin' yuh for the Los Dedos?" Montana inquired.

"As long as they live," said Tate, "but I reckon they'll be takin' orders from Carson now that ol' Kiowa is finished. Kiowa was the brains o' that outfit.

Carson ain't the kind t' let a good thing slip through his fingers an' them two Harpers'll stick around t' make things plenty hot fer me. They'll want revenge, yuh know, even ef they don't ever git the Los Dedos. Yep! I'll be fightin' Carson from now on an' mebbe that jasper, Burt Kelton an' his friends from the *Santos Rojos.*"

"That much is certain," said Montana gravely. "The sheriff is in cahoots with Carson. No doubt about that. Listen!"

"Sounds like a hoss comin' from up thataway!" Tate grunted.

They strained their eyes northward. Away out on the prairie they saw the Harper mounts lift their heads and gaze up toward the rise of high ground from which they had first seen the Los Dedos ranch. Heat waves danced over the sea of green. Suddenly a single rider hove up on the rise, reined in and started down toward them. Montana caught the flash of a bright-colored *reboso* and a shock of golden hair flaming in the sun.

"Why—why—" he gasped incredulously. "It's Margy Parkins followin' our trail, Tate!"

"Margy Parkins? Alone?" Tate stared out over the prairie. "It cain't be, son! What'd she be doin' over here alone?"

"It's her, all right!" Montana declared abruptly. "I'd know her *reboso* an' hair anytime! Somethin' must be up at the Jay Bar or she wouldn't be out huntin' us!"

Now they could see only her body bobbing through the buffalo grass. She swung up to the Harper horses and never stopped. As if dead tired her mount stumbled suddenly and almost went down. But she pulled up its head just in time. Inspired with a sudden fear, the buckeroo looked anxiously at Tate.

"The Harpers or the *vaqueros* might take a shot at her, Tate!" he groaned. "I got a notion t' rack out there an' meet her. I could make it, I reckon, afore they got me!"

"Don't be a ijit, Montany!" Tate protested. "Yuh wouldn't git fifty yards afore they plugged yuh. Ef the greasers didn't, one o' the Harpers shore would. It's a cinch she don't know they's a fight goin' on!"

"Anyway, I'm rackin' out t' meet her!" Montana leaped toward the door. "No use lettin' her ride into a bullet!" He paused at the door and yelled at the dozing twisters. "Snap out o' it, yuh buckeroos!" he shouted. "Margy Parkins is ridin' down on us alone! I'm goin' out t' meet her! Yuh fellers cover me!"

"What's she doin' on the Los Dedos alone?" demanded Sam Culver, running up to Tate's side. "Somethin' must be wrong over at the Jay Bar!"

Montana was out through the door before anyone could stop him. Expecting to be shot at every step, he ran swiftly to Skyrocket and vaulted into the saddle. Driving in his spurs he whirled the big Morgan about and headed at a fast gallop across the yard.

CHAPTER XI

DEATH hounded Montana Larkin's heels as he charged Skyrocket pell-mell around the cabin and into the open of the prairie. The Mexicans, aroused from their siesta in the coulee by the sound of thudding hoofs, opened up on him quickly.

From the windows of the cabin, the twisters fired back, sending an almost solid stream of death ripping through the buffalo grass. The Mexicans seemed momentarily to forget about the cabin and were giving their entire attention to bringing down Montana. But the buckeroo must have borne a charmed life, for he thundered through their hail of lead as if he were immune to the slugs that whined perilous songs about him.

Tensely Tate watched Margy Parkins as she raced forward, expecting any instant to see Gabe or Rufe Harper raise up suddenly in the grass and take a pot-shot at her. He was ready for just such an emergency, however. But Margy was still a good quarter of a mile away, perhaps more.

But riding her tired and almost winded horse as fast as she could spur him forward, she raced down into a small coulee and out onto the level of the prairie again. Just then Tate glimpsed Rufe Harper as he rose up suddenly in the grass and fired pointblank at her horse. The beast rared up, shrieked loudly and plunged down. Margy sailed through the air and was swallowed up. Tate risked a quick shot at the insane breed, but knew before he pulled the trigger that he had scored a clean miss. Then Rufe vanished in the green ocean that surrounded him.

Montana had seen what had happened. He drove his spurs deep into Skyrocket's lathered flanks. Bent low in his saddle, with bullets fanning his cheek, he plunged toward her. His hat sailed suddenly from his head as a Mexican bullet tore through it. But he never faltered, never slackened his break-neck pace.

Gabe Harper rose up suddenly in the grass and flung his rifle toward Montana. Tate saw him instantly. With a howl of fury he drew a quick bead and fired. Before Gabe could plant a slug in the buckeroo, the bullet from the cabin ripped through his neck. His rifle flew from his hands. He dropped forward and was gone from view. Then once more Tate had a glimpse of Rufe. The insane breed's naked body flashed in the sun as he rose up with his rifle at his shoulder. Montana spurred his horse aside, placing himself between the breed and the cabin. Tate swore under his breath, for his rifle

was at his shoulder. Afraid of hitting the buckeroo, he lowered it and waited.

He did not have long to wait. Montana threw up his arms abruptly and plunged from his saddle.

"Rufe got him!" the big man roared at the twisters. "He dropped Montany! Good Gawd, what'll that dirty breed do t' Margy now! She must have been knocked out when she tumbled!"

The buckeroos leaped toward him and peered out the window. Only Montana's horse and the Harper mounts were visible now in that sea of green. Skyrocket, with dangling reins, stood where Montana had fallen.

"I'm gittin' plumb tired o' bein' holed up in this cabin!" Sam Culver cried anxiously. "Ef Montany had the guts t' ride out there, I'm fer doin' the same! Let's go git Margy an' chase them damn greasers clear out o' the country! Yuh got the guts, Tate?"

The other Jay Bar twisters, fearful of Margy's fate, were quick to take up the cry. There was not a single one of them who would not go through hell and high water for Margy Parkins or Montana Larkin, and Tate knew there would be no holding them in the cabin longer.

"I'm willin'!" he said abruptly. "They's nine o' us, not countin' Abbott who's about ready t' cash in, but some o' us ought t' reach Margy in time t' shoot that crazy half breed afore he harms her. Come on!"

He went swiftly to Red Abbott who lay where he had been placed on a bunk. His face was white, but he was conscious. Weak from loss of blood, he struggled into a sitting position, nursing his arm. The blood had stopped flowing by now, but in the terrific heat gangrene had set in swiftly to stamp mortal agony in his eyes.

"I heard what yuh said, Tate," he spoke weakly. "They got Montana an' that breed, Rufe, ketched Margy Parkins. Help me up, Tate! I'm goin' with yuh arter that skunk!"

"Now take it easy, Red," warned Tate. "Yuh cain't ride none with that arm. It's swelled up big as my leg. But we got a better job for yuh, son. Ef yuh think yuh kin make it, we want yuh t' stay here an' sort o' cover us when we rack out! Them greasers are liable t' start chargin' after us an' we want yuh t' pick 'em off ef yuh kin shoot a gun."

"Ef I kin stand on my pins, I kin shoot, hombre!" Abbott stated. "Gimme a hand an' we'll see!"

Tate assisted him to his feet. The young buckeroo's knees banged together. Sam Culver brought him a dipper of water and after drinking it he said he felt better. Tate shoved a loaded six-shooter into his good hand and led him to a chair placed well back from the windows. It was near the center of the room and from there he could look out in three directions just by turning his head. He sat down with a sigh, his injured arm hanging large and loose by his side.

"Better gimme Rusty's hawglaig also, Tate," he said. "Reckon one gun ain't enough. I'd have a helluva time reloadin, not bein' able t' use my hand."

Culver handed him Rusty's six-gun which he shoved into his belt. Then taking his own gun on his knees, he sat stiff in the chair, holding his wabbling head high that he might look out over the window sills. The remaining twisters charged the door, flung it open and slipped outside to hug the cabin wall until they placed it between them and the vaqueros. Then with Tate running with them, they raced to their horses which were grazing unconcernedly down by the creek.

From inside the cabin, Red Abbott watched them through the north window as they thundered across the yard and headed for open prairie. A spasm of pain shot through his swollen arm. He shook his head savagely for relief and looked out toward the coulee where the Mexicans lay. One of them stood up suddenly to take a shot at the cavalcade. His rifle cracked twice in quick succession before the red-haired twister got his gun up.

Dazed as he was, Red sensed that the vaquero was beyond range for effective six-gun work. But inspired with hatred he aimed high and fired, trusting to luck that his slug might find its mark. He shouted in delirium when he saw the Mexican topple backward out of sight with blood spurting from his temple.

"That oughta hold 'em in their places!" he told himself, and his voice sounded far away. The distant thunder of pounding hoofs drew his attention back to the northward. Sam Culver was reeling in his saddle out on the prairie, trying hard to remain seated, the vaquero's first bullet lodged in his shoulder.

As for Margy, she regained her senses to find that Rufe Harper had dragged her into the coulee. She had been partially stunned when her horse fell and one of his hoofs had grazed her head. One look at the breech-clouted breed, his face twisted with his insane look of delight, brought a scream of sudden terror to her lips. Like some hideous monster materializing out of a terrible nightmare Rufe Harper stood gloating over her, his rifle in the crook of his left arm, his eyes wild and gleaming. Saliva dribbled down from his open mouth, across his foul chin and along his throat. He seemed transfixed by her beauty.

He reached down suddenly to touch her knee which was bare now. Her breeches had been torn by brush in her night ride across the El Pasos. She recoiled and kicked out at him. It only served to increase his delight in her. His hairless chest began suddenly to heave and his breath came hot and hard. She sensed that he was going to spring at her and pulled away from him, appalled.

"You let me alone!" she cried at him as he stepped toward her. "Do you hear? Montana Larkin will hunt you down like a dog and kill you! Who are you?"

"Me Rufe Harper," the breed mumbled. "*Chiquita* don't like Rufe, hey?

Montana, yuh say? The buckeroo is dead! I killed him! They killed pap an' Jess an' Lafe an' Gabe! Me alone now. They kill me soon, but not before I get what I want. Then I go happy, *chiquita*!"

Harper made a sudden, savage lunge at her and with maniacal strength crushed her to him. She fought and struggled on the ground under his strangling embrace. But she might as well have fought to free herself from the arms of a gorilla. He had the strength of a beast. His hot, feverish lips found her cheek. His breath was sour and fetid with the rank smell of Indian *kinnikinic* which he chewed for want of white man's tobacco. She began to scream in full terror, but he clapped a hand over her mouth.

Margy fought back at him like a wildcat, clawing and kicking. Had she been able to use her teeth, she would have bitten him. He held on, mumbling evil things in her ear. Only when she managed to sink her teeth in the palm of his hand did he uncover her mouth. She breathed hard to fill her tortured lungs and planted her small fist in his face. He laughed insanely and then started beating her with murderous fury.

Suddenly she thought of her father's derringer in her pocket. But the way he was holding her down she knew she could not get at it. She wrenched hard, trying to dislodge him. He slapped her fiercely and made her cheek sting. But she managed to get her hand on the pistol. As he pressed his hot lips against her own, she jammed the derringer into his ribs and pulled the trigger. There was no explosion. The hammer clicked on the empty chamber. Before she could pull back the second hammer, he brushed her arm aside.

Just then the hundred and ninety pounds of fighting Montana sprang down into the coulee, got him by the throat and yanked him up. She looked up to see Montana Larkin, his face twisted in unbridled fury, spin Rufe Harper around and plant his right fist into his face with a smack that sounded like a pistol shot. She sprang up to get out of his way as the breed toppled over backward and landed kicking. Quick as a flash he was back on his feet and tugging at the butcher knife in his beaded scabbard. Awed by the buckeroo's unexpected appearance after Rufe had announced his death, she stood watching, her legs and hands trembling. Rufe launched himself forward with arm upraised to drive home his long, murderous blade.

A cry sprang to her lips as their bodies came together, Montana grasping Harper's knife-arm in midair and holding on for dear life. Rufe hooked a leg about him to throw him off balance. But Montana was wise to such Indian tactics. He shot his right arm about the small of the breed's glistening back and pressed backward with his left hand. Slowly Harper's body gave. Then suddenly the buckeroo flung him stumbling backward. Before Rufe could recover his balance, Montana was upon him, his hands clutching at his throat, one knee holding down his knife hand.

Rufe Harper wrenched and struggled. He had the strength of a cornered bear, but in his wild fury Montana Larkin would have been the match for a grizzly. Veins stood out on his neck as he gave every bit of strength he

could muster to his grip. Rufe's wicked, insane eyes began to pop. A faint, gurgling cry came from his loose lips.

"Don't kill me!" Margy thought she heard him plead. "Don't kill me!"

But Montana was beyond hearing anything just then. He wanted to hear only the death rattle from the throat of the beast under him. He sank his fingers deeper and twisted his hands. His strong thumbs bit through skin and flesh. Blood spurted. In the throes of death, Rufe Harper lost his grip on his butcher knife. His legs beat down the grass. His sallow face went black with strangulation as Montana Larkin literally tore the throat out of him. Margy looked away, feeling strangely weak. From up on the level of the prairie she heard the thud of many hoofs and the distant crackle of gun-fire. Then she saw Bull Tate and the twisters come into view, leading Skyrocket. They plunged down into the coulee to find Montana rising from the inert body of Rufe Harper. One look at the breed was sufficient to tell them he was dead. Margy glanced fearfully at the buckeroo, then ran blindly into his arms.

"Oh, Montana," she broke suddenly into tears. Tate and the twisters stared at him, wondering if he was hurt. They at first had thought him dead, but when they rode down on Skyrocket and did not find his body, they suspected that he had fallen from his horse as a subterfuge to prevent Rufe from shooting at him further.

"Hurt any, Margy?" Montana's voice was soft now. "What did that dirty snake do t' yuh?"

"I'm all right, Montana," she sobbed. "I fought him off until you came. He said he had killed you."

"He tried damn hard," Montana growled, "and he'd have done it too if I hadn't dropped off Skyrocket and played dead. I couldn't get a shot at him the way I was dodgin' bullets. Yuh shore gave me a scare, *chiquita*! What are yuh doin' over here—alone?"

"I had to find you, *querido*," she sobbed. "I could go nowhere else for help. Father is dead ——"

"Parkins dead—*dead*?" Montana's body tensed and he stood away from her to glance up at Tate and the buckeroos who still sat their horses. They were dumbfounded. "Yuh can't mean that, Margy!" Montana continued. "Why, he was plumb all right when we left last night!"

"I know, Montana," Margy dabbed at her eyes with her *reboso*, "but two or three hours after you left the ranch, Burt Kelton rode up with a posse looking for you and Mister Tate! He had with him a beast named Taos Dawson and another dog like him they called the Durango Kid! Dawson insulted me and father got mad. He struck him down with his cane and the Durango Kid hit father over the head with his gun and killed him! Oh, it was terrible, Montana! They made me cook their supper and treated me rough—as rough as that beast, Harper! They killed Jim Quak, too. I set fire to a haystack to call the boys in from the range. I don't know whether they

saw it or not, for I got away after shooting Durango with this—father's derringer!"

"Yuh mean yuh killed the Durango Kid, maam?" Tate stepped down from his horse and strode up to them.

Margy nodded violently. "Yes," she said in a trembling voice, "I killed him! I just had to kill him for the way he treated father! I don't know how I did it! I only remember seeing him fall with a ghastly hole between his eyes!"

"Waal—maam," soothed Tate quietly, "I don't reckon I'd feel upset about killin' a skunk like him! Ef I was yuh, I'd be plumb tickled! Pore ol' Jim kin rest in peace, I reckon, knowin' that yuh avenged him. What did yuh do arterwards? Ride all night over the mountings?"

"Yes," she replied. "I rode one of the posse's horses all night. But I got lost up there when fog settled down and had a hard time finding your trail again. I came as swiftly as I could with my horse badly winded. Now I've got to hurry back and see what is to be done about father."

"How many jaspers did Burt have in his posse?" Tate inquired.

"There were twenty-five men altogether, including Burt," she replied. "Now that he's been made chief deputy, that Taos Dawson seems to have Burt under his thumb. I heard them plotting to *run* Pecos and make themselves rich and the sheriff is in collusion with them. Burt was drunk, as usual."

"The dirty scut!" Montana breathed. "He's been stringin' along with that *Santos Rojos* crowd for a long time an' now I reckon they got him just where they want him! Yuh know what that means, Margy? It means that Pecos is gonna have a' epidemic o' six-gun law, with the sheriff's office run by some o' the worst hombres in the state! It won't even be safe t' walk the streets o' Pecos no more! But they won't get away with it! I'm sayin' they won't!"

"Yuh're damn right about that, son," asserted Tate gravely. "It takes two t' make a fight! They started it an' we'll finish it pronto!"

"I overheard Taos Dawson telling Burt that they would settle with you promptly," said Margy, with more composure. "I expect they'll be coming over here to run you out of the Los Dedos. It won't be safe for either you or Montana to return to Pecos now. They'll probably kill you on sight!"

From the direction of the cabin came a sudden resumption of shooting. They stood listening for a moment. Mingled with the distant crack of guns as Red Abbott kept the vaqueros in their places, Margy's last words stood out starkly for Montana Larkin. At last he looked at Tate and then at the hard-faced twisters. News of Jim Parkins' killing did not set well with the buckeroos, even though the actual killer had been dealt swift justice by Margy.

"Well, hombres," Montana said grimly, "I reckon we're gonna get ourselves shot up in order t' give Burt Kelton an' his pack o' wolves a chance t' string Tate an' me up! The Jay Bar Pee is in this fight now! They murdered our boss an' not a finer gent ever lived than Jay Bar Parkins! Yuh all know that! Burt's got it in for the Jay Bar on account o' Margy slappin' his face an' because we ain't ever had no respect for him. He swore he was goin' t' tame

us down an' take the sass out o' us. Singly, us Jay Bar buckeroos won't have a chance agin that pack o' *orejanas,* but collectively it's a hoss o' a different color. I'm askin' for volunteers t' ride with me an' Tate t' Pecos an' call Kelton's hand afore he gets started makin' himself rich on the fat o' the land? Anybody agin goin' with me?"

The twisters scowled at him ominously. There was no indecision in their looks.

"Fight, fiddle or run, Montany," spoke up Steve Colton, "we are with yuh an' the Jay Bar Pee!"

"I knowed it all along, Steve," said Montana with a grin. "I jes' wanted t' make sure! Right now we'll have t' slope back t' Tate's cabin an' pick up Red an' the Jay Bar nags, an' mebbe do a little buryin' on the side. If we can get past them greasers, it won't take long."

"What are you fighting Mexicans for," Margy looked at him curiously. "Where do they come in on this Los Dedos situation?"

Quickly Montana explained to her the fight with the trail-herders. She listened intently, frowning.

"So with them vaqueros layin' out in the coulee waitin' t' pick us off," Montana concluded, "we'll have t' run sort o' a ga'ntlet t' get back t' the cabin. We can't run off an' leave Red Abbott. The poor galoot has got his arm almost shot off an' them vaqueros'd make short work o' him if we left him. Also, they'd take them fifty Morgans when they racked South!"

"I don't care about the horses," said Margy as if suddenly aware of her responsibility in handling the affairs of the Jay Bar now that her father was dead. "Let them go so we can get started back to the ranch. But we can't leave Red to die out here. How can you get him without losing more lives?"

"I got a' idee," said Montana grimly. "I reckon them greasers have got about all the fightin' they can stomach right now an' it won't take much t' chase 'em off. I noticed a box o' dynamite down at yuhr cabin, Tate. Anything in it?"

"Yeah," said Tate, looking at him quizzically, "it's full an' they's a coil o' fuse in the box. Brought the stuff up from Laredo figgerin' t' do a leetle prospectin' when I got in the mood. Why?"

"My idee was t' sneak back t' the cabin, fix up a couple o' sticks with short fuses attached," Montana's eyes gleamed, "an' crawl out t' where I could heave 'em into that coulee where the greasers are holed-up. I reckon they wouldn't stay on here no longer an' face them kind o' bombs!"

"Yuh said it, son!" Tate grinned. "Why didn't we think o' that afore? I'll go with yuh."

"That's what I had in mind," said Montana, turning to Margy and the buckeroos. "Yuh stay here with Steve an' the boys, Margy," he continued. "We got t' chase them vaqueros afore it'll be safe for yuh t' rack down t' the cabin. I'll leave my hoss here. Soon as them Mexes are gone, I'll signal t' yuh t' come with three quick shots."

"How long will it take?" she asked. "We've got to hurry, Montana!"

"Half an hour at most, *chiquita,*" said Montana.

"Please be careful," she urged as the twisters stepped down from their mounts and sprawled out in the coulee to wait. "Remember, Montana, if it were not for you, I'd be absolutely alone now."

CHAPTER XII

A HALF an hour later, Red Abbott, sobbing with pain and delirium, looked through the north window of the cabin and saw them lying in the grass on the edge of the yard. Wondering what it was all about, he watched. Suddenly Tate and Montana rose erect and started running speedily toward the cabin. The Mexicans saw them instantly and started shooting. Bullets kicked up spurts of dirt at their flying feet. Like a drunken man the flame-haired twister lifted his six-gun and fired toward the coulee at a bit of color he saw vaguely. His six-shooter felt heavy as lead in his hand and when he fired it kicked far back.

Bursting into the cabin, Tate and the buckeroo found him wabbling dizzily in the chair. His breath was coming in short, painful gasps now and his whole left side seemed swollen. Montana guessed immediately what was wrong. Blood-poison and gangrene! He sensed at a glance that Red would soon cash in his chips. Even the left side of his neck and face were enlarged. But despite his terrible agony, the twister had gamely remained at his post and had kept the vaqueros from charging the house. One of his six-shooters was lying on the floor at his feet. The other he held across his knees and it, too, was empty now.

"I'm—glad—yuh—come—back, Montany," he sobbed brokenly. "I—cain't hold—out—no longer! I'm done in! I'm—I'm dying'!"

"Dyin' hell, Red!" gritted Montana. "Why we'll have yuh over in Pecos t' the doc' afore yuh know it!"

The twister shook his head to the contrary.

"Don't try t' move me, Montany," he gasped in agony. "Jes' let me die easy-like. What's doin'? Margy——?"

"She's okay, Red," said Montana as Tate stepped up with a dipper of water. Montana took it and held it to the twister's ashen lips. "Now yuh jes' keep a stiff upper lip, amigo, an' watch us chase them damn greasers so far they won't even be able t' write back!"

After Red had sipped a swallow or two from the dipper, he dropped it aside. Already Tate was dragging out his box of dynamite. The twister looked

on in a daze as they broke it open and began cutting short fuses from the coil. Expertly Montana attached them to sticks of dynamite. Many times up in Montana he had helped his father clear land by blowing out stumps with high explosives. But in this case the fuses were no more than six inches in length, just long enough, after being ignited from a cigarette, to allow him time to hurl the bombs a short distance before they exploded.

He worked swiftly until he had six sticks prepared, then calmly he rolled a cigarette, stuck it between his lips and gathered them up. Leaving Tate to cover him in case the Mexicans should detect him, he slipped out of the cabin. Crawling across the yard on his hands and knees, he made for the high grass. Tate, standing back from the window overlooking the coulee, watched him grimly. Soon he was swallowed up in the grass.

For some minutes thereafter, silence ruled over the Los Dedos. The prairie might have been deserted. Suddenly the cabin shook with a terrific explosion that jarred Red Abbott from his chair. The twister fell to the floor with a scream of agony. Looking out over the coulee Tate saw great chunks of earth and debris rise high into the air, not directly from the coulee itself, but well to one side. He realized that Montana had hurled his bomb to the side to frighten rather than kill, for after all, the buckeroo had no private grudge against the vaqueros. He saw Montana's right arm as it described a quick arc over the grass within fifty feet or so of the coulee. Once more the Los Dedos shook under the explosion. Dirt and debris skyrocketed into the air just beyond where the Mexicans lay. This time Red Abbott made no sound. He was sprawled out on the floor with his legs drawn far up in an attitude of terrible agony.

Tate sighed with relief when he looked at him. He knew he was dead of a poisoned slug. He had known of several occasions when gringo-hating Mexicans down along the border had poisoned their bullets as an Indian poisoned his war arrows. It was a dirty Yaqui trick especially designed to cause slow death and mortal agony to any enemy as much as scratched by the slugs. Just how they did it, he never learned. But he guessed that one of the vaqueros had followed an old Indian custom of permitting a rattler to strike at the liver of a jackrabbit and allowing it to rot in the sun, creating a deadly, gangrenous poison in which to dip his bullets.

But with the hurling of his second bomb, Montana did not have long to wait before the vaqueros made a mad scramble for their plunging horses. From the cabin, Tate saw them vault into their saddles and yelled. Montana stood up suddenly in the grass and hurled another bomb which, had he wanted to, could have been planted squarely among them. This kind of fighting struck terror at their hearts. They reasoned that the gringo devil hurling the bombs had only missed them because his aim was bad. But no telling when he might plant death in their midst. They lost no time in putting distance between them and the daring gringo who stood boldly in the open now and hurled death across the sky.

To lend them additional incentive to get out of the Los Dedos, Montana calmly touched off bomb after bomb and hulrled it after them. Like frightened coyotes they ran southward in full panic, bending low in their saddles and never looking back. As they went the buckeroo took stock of their number. The fight had decimated them down to a mere nine. They left six dead behind them. Empty handed he hurried back toward the cabin. In the yard he pulled out his six-shooter and fired three times into the air as a signal for Margy and the twisters to come forward. Before he entered the cabin he saw them ride out of their coulee and gallop toward him. Grinning broadly, Tate met him at the door.

"Yuh shore put the fear o' hell in them jaspers, Montany!" he said. "Did yuh see 'em slope? I don't think they'll come back, not even fer them cows! But ef I'd been slingin' them bombs, son, I'd have planted 'em right in their middle t' git the skunk that shot pore Red with a p'izened bullet! He jes' cashed in his chips, Montany, an' no jasper ever died harder!"

"That's tough," said the buckeroo earnestly. "She sure is! Oh, well, it's like ol' Jay Bar Parkins was always sayin'—t'day yuh're livin' an' t'morrow somebody's shovelin' dirt over yuh. We got a heap o' shovelin' t' do here afore we go. I reckon that little knoll over there is as good as any place t' plant our dead. As for them dead greasers—the buzzards an' coyotes'll save us the job. What are yuh gonna do about them cows?"

"I was figgerin' on leavin' 'em where they are ontil later," said Tate. "Ef yuh're headin' fer Pecos, I'm goin' along. Them critters kin wait. Ef they're still here when I get back, I'll put 'em on my range an' telegraph the money for 'em down t' Del Rio. I already got a bill o' sale, provin' up on the brands an' such. They'll be okay fer the present. With them Harpers gone, I don't reckon anbody'd bother 'em, onless them greasers come back, which-all ain't likely."

Montana shrugged. "Well," he said, "supposin' we clean up some. I don't want Margy t' see Red an' Rusty an' the others. She's upset enough. We'll lug 'em out o' the yard an' lay 'em in the grass, eh?"

"I was thinkin' the same, son," said Tate, rolling up his sleeves. "We'll have t' hurry. She'll be rackin' along pronto!"

They went about the task speedily. Red Abbott's swollen body was a gruesome burden, but they packed it out of the cabin and carried it to the grass on the edge of the yard. That done they hurried back for Rusty. Stony Yoakum went next. Soon most of the traces of the fight were removed when Margy rode up on Skyrocket. They brought Sam Culver to the cabin with them, having found him sitting in the grass beside his horse out on the prairie, a bad wound in his shoulder. He was painfully hurt, but not mortally, and after a drink of whiskey from a bottle which Tate magically produced from a hiding place in the cabin, he was soon in comparatively good spirits.

It was sundown when they started northward again. The heat of the Basin

had gradually subsided until now it was cool. Vagrant breezes whipping down from the snow-splashed peaks of the El Pasos was like a tonic relieving them of much of their weariness. But back on the little knoll near the cabin were buried five faithful Jay Bar twisters who would never know weariness again. With the simple, brief rites of the range they had been placed together side by side in a long grave. Montana mumbled a bit of prayer over them while the others stood silently by with bowed heads. The grave was then quickly filled and piled high with field stones as a protection against ghoulish coyotes.

The burials over, the stolen Morgans were hazed out of the corral and put on the range. They knew the horses would not range far from the cabin, for there was plenty of feed and water there to hold them. But Montana was reluctant to leave them even temporarily, knowing that the mares in the band would soon increase the number in the herd. He always liked to look after the spindly-legged colts as they came, for he recognized that attention develops a better breed. At any rate, he respected Margy's haste to return to the Jay Bar to look after her father's burial, and he was not a little anxious to get back himself.

They rode northward in silence without pushing the pace. Mounted on Red Abbott's horse, Margy trotted between Montana and Tate, with the twisters taking up the rear, dozing in their saddles. Night came all too soon, but when twilight faded into darkness they were heading up the east slopes of the El Pasos. Once under the canopy of tall, sighing pines and cedars, darkness swallowed them like an impenetrable black fog. The worn shoes of the horses struck sparks from the flinty stones along the trail. As they went single file with Montana in the lead followed by Margy and Tate, they smelled rain coming from somewhere up in the higher pinnacles. The sky toward the southwest was overcast and an occasional flicker of lightning played over the peaks. But the storm moved eastward and except for a few drops of rain that fell along about midnight, the cavalcade was spared a cold, wet night.

They were well down the western slopes when dawn began to brighten the skies behind them. The Pecos Valley now lay far below. The sun was up before they had a glimpse of the Jay Bar Pee ranch house and out-buildings. They looked like white doll-houses from the slopes and the valley was green. The white structures seemed no larger than cubes of sugar. Far over on the west boundaries of the ranch the Pecos coursed an uneven way southward like a silver ribbon.

It was nearly noon when they rode down off the slopes and started at a faster pace for the ranch. A good hour later they galloped up the lane to the house. Monte Gordon and Buff Anderson, rifles in the crooks of their arms, stepped down anxiously from the veranda to meet them.

"Good Lord, Margy," said Buff with a sigh of relief, "we been searchin' all over for yuh! Why didn't yuh leave some word where yuh went? We found yuhr tracks out in the feed lot an' reckoned yuh set fire t' the stack. But

from there yuh left no trace! We figgered yuh was kidnaped by that crowd o' outlaws that came here t'other night! Yuh all right?"

"I'm all right, Anderson," Margy, as if all fatigue and weariness had suddenly left her, slid down from her horse and rushed up to him. "Where's father?"

"We carried him into the parlor, maam," put in Monte solemnly. "He's got good company. Charlie Sloane's body is lyin' in there on the floor."

"Sloane?" Montana stepped up abruptly. "They get him, too, Monte?"

"They shore did, Montana!" growled Anderson. "Never knew what hit him! Them outlaws shore shot hell into us afore they sloped, but I reckon we gave better'n we took. They left two jaspers behind. We buried 'em this mornin' out in the gulch with Jim Quak an' a feller that Pinto Bogue recognized as the Durango Kid. We racked in when we saw the haystack burnin'. Figgerin' that was a trick t' lure us in off the range, the boys went back out t' keep their eyes on the nags. They been workin' in relays all night an' t'day. But them outlaws never came back."

"Outlaws hell!" Montana growled. "That was a posse made up by Burt Kelton t' get Tate an' me!"

He watched Margy hurry across the veranda and disappear into the house.

"Posse? Burt Kelton?" the buckeroos chorused in surprise. "Then what the hell did they bash in Parkins' head for?" added Monte sullenly. "He didn't have no gun on him!"

"The Durango Kid done that!" Montana said coldly. "Margy killed him for it with a derringer from Jay Bar's pocket, then racked over the El Pasos after us. We went over there after them rustled Morgans."

"Yep, Monte," volunteered Sam Culver, nursing his injured shoulder, "an' we left five o' our men planted over there in the Los Dedos. This is what I got t' show fer that scrap."

Monte and Buff appraisingly glanced over the hard-bitten crew and Gordon gasped.

"Red?" he asked. "An' Jenkins an' Rusty an' Stony an' Bob Maxwell?"

"Yep!" Culver responded looking squarely at Tate. "Maxwell jes' made one mistake too many an' met up with a' unavoidable accident."

Tate said nothing and toyed idly with his cinches.

"But what sticks in my craw," growled Anderson, "is why they bashed in Parkins' head? He wouldn't have hurt a fly!"

"Taos Dawson insulted Margy," volunteered Montana quietly, "an' Parkins kayoed him with his cane. The Durango Kid up an' lays his gun across Jim's head."

"Taos Dawson, eh? What was he doin' here?"

"Git wise t' yuhrself, Monte!" Sam Culver grunted. "Cain't yuh put two an' two t'gether? Taos Dawson is Burt Kelton's chief deppity now an' was here with the posse!"

"So that's it, eh?" Anderson exploded. "What's he an' Burt after yuh for, Montany?"

"Because I'm a friend o' Tate's here," said the foreman. "Me an' Tate busted into a scheme o' his t' back Joe Carson in sellin' government land on faked deeds over in the Los Dedos. Gave us forty-eight hours t' git out o' the county, sayin' he was swearin' in Taos Dawson an' other hard customers as deputies t' see that we git. What they want most, I reckon, is t' get Tate out o' the way so they can sell his Los Dedos Ranch. But there's some hombres that won't ever cash in on that deal, eh, Tate?"

"Yuh said it, Montany!" Tate grinned. "Thanks t' yuh an' yuhr twisters. We shore cleaned out that tribe o' Harpers!"

"But what's t' prevent us from rackin' into Pecos an' stampin' out the dirty *orejanas* that come here t'other night?" Gordon demanded eagerly. "Why, with hombres like Taos Dawson in the sheriff's office, it won't be safe t' stick yuhr nose out o' doors! Dawson's a lowdown crook an' a white slaver! He'll run hawg-wild over Pecos shore as hell!"

"Yuh said a shovel-full, Monte!" said Anderson rebelliously. "They had no right comin' here an' killin' Parkins! Ef I had my way, I'd take every damn twister on this spread an' rack into Pecos plumb pronto for a showdown! Which-all reminds me that this is payday, also! I reckon we'll be headin' into town t'night an' we'll find a lot o' the waddies from the Circle X an' the Double O hangin' out in the Red Onion! I'm proposin' that we all git t'gether an' gang up on the *Santos Rojos*! Ef Burt's there, it'll be jes' too damn bad fer him!"

"Jes' keep yuhr shirts on, boys," spoke up Montana warningly. "No use goin' off half-cocked thataway. Remember, Dawson represents the law, such as it is, even if he's the rottenest *orejana* in Texas. Even if they did kill Parkins, we ain't got anything on him an' Kelton that they can't prove legal. They can show that they struck Jay Bar in self defense an' because he interfered with officers doin' their duty."

"Which-all means," growled Monte hotly, "that they might get out a warrant agin Margy fer killin' the Durango Kid! He was a deppity, warn't he?"

Montana nodded. "I was thinkin' along them lines," he said. "Burt's got it in for her an' is plumb liable t' do anything. All I got t' say is, he better not try anything like that. I'll kill him by inches an' he knows it! Now yuh boys get some rest! We're goin' into town come evenin' an' yuh might need a clear eye! Sabe? Come on, Tate!"

He turned abruptly on his heels and stepped up onto the veranda. Tate followed and the twisters, talking and mumbling among themselves left the house and headed for the bunkhouse to further discuss the tragedy that had suddenly come over the Jay Bar Pee.

Montana strode quietly into the house with Tate on his heels. Jim Quak's meat cleaver was still sticking in the door frame. They glanced at it grimly

as they entered, noticing also that nothing, apparently, had been disturbed in the dining room since the bloody visit of the posse.

They trailed silently to the parlor and paused at the door. Parkins' body lay where the twisters had placed it on a sofa. Margy was kneeling down beside him, her arms thrown over him and her head cradled on them. She was sobbing softly in her grief and was unaware of their presence. The scene brought a bitter lump into the buckeroo's throat, for it reminded him of the day his own father had been sniped in the back by Marco Brett, then a sheepherder in Montana. The body of Charlie Sloane lay a few feet away on the floor, with a blanket spread over his silent form.

In respect for her grief and her apparent desire to be alone with the only parent she had ever known, Montana nodded at Tate and together they tip-toed into Parkins' cubby-hole of an office which opened off from the dining room. Motioning the big man to a seat on a worn horse-hair couch, he sat down at the desk and buried his head in his hands wearily. He was both angry and bewildered, not certain of anything now except that death and sorrow gave a strange, unnatural air to the place. It was like the day his father had died. He wondered what Margy would do now that her father was gone? Would she want to sell the ranch and go east to live among relatives there? Or would she remain and continue where her father had left off? He wondered if there was a will of any kind left by the rancher. If so, it would be with the other papers in the small safe in the corner. Of one thing he was certain, however, he was dead tired. The couch on which Tate now sat looked more inviting to him just then than anything he could think of.

But he had a task or two to finish up before snatching any sleep. As Anderson had brought to his memory, it was payday. Not even death ever stopped that on the Jay Bar Pee. The men were paid regularly and on time. More than ever they would be eager to ride into town and there would be no holding them back. Moreover, he felt certain there would be trouble, possibly fatal shootings, in Pecos that night. Unquestionably the Circle X and Double O punchers would join forces with the twisters to avenge the unwarranted raid on the Jay Bar and the murder of Jim Parkins, particularly so when they learned the Dawson crowd had committed the crimes. It being Saturday and payday for most of the valley ranches, they would all be in the Red Onion by nightfall.

Most of the respectable riders and ranchers along the Pecos fulfilled their social obligations in the Red Onion. The saloon was admittedly the best in town and tolerated no barflies or unnecessary horse play. Its games were on the level and the proprietor, Tom Brennen, was high in the esteem of all who knew him. To be able to drink there proved one's social standing in the community. Of course there were some who preferred the *Santos Rojos.* Among them were the O Bar O waddies and their boss, Jim Fannin. Seldom did they go to the Red Onion unless they were looking for a fight.

Bad blood existed between the Double O and the O Bar O due, among

other things, to the similarity of brands. While it had never been conclusively proven, it was common talk that the Fannin crowd had no compunction about burning a bar frequently between the O's of the Double O steers, making as neat an O Bar O brand as could have been found anywhere on the Roaring Forks rangelands. So the O Bar O men kept away from the Red Onion and hung out at the *Santos Rojos.*

Tired and weary and heart-sore as he was, Montana knew that if his twisters went into town and joined up with the Double O punchers in a drinking bout, there would be plenty doing, especially if they happened by chance or pre-arrangement to run into any O Bar O men. And he knew that when told that the *Santos Rojos* crowd had participated in the murder of Jim Parkins, the Double O riders would be prone to lay some of the blame on the O Bar O outfit whether they had anything to do with it or not. Just because they hung out at the *Santo Rojos* was sufficient reason for them to go there on a hunt for trouble. Trouble was inevitable and the twisters would waste no time in confiding their woes to the Double O and Circle X punchers. The bosses of all three outfits were fast friends and an enemy was a common enemy. Trouble would not be dodged. It would be made if Montana Larkin could read the writing on the wall and the souls of his men!

"Take it easy a spell, Tate," he said quietly. "I got t' make up the payroll. Parkins brought the money in from town. It ought t' be in the safe. Be done in two shakes an' then we'll talk things over."

"Take yuhr time, Montany," said Tate as the buckeroo got up and went to the safe. "I reckon this leetle rest ain't hurtin' me none. I'm plumb tard an' I don't mind admittin' it."

He saw Montana stop dead in his tracks and stand staring down at the safe which had been obscured from view by the high, roll-top desk. The buckeroo's face went white and a curse exploded on his lips.

"It's been rifled!" he exclaimed. "Shore as hell! Somebody's gone through the safe an' scattered Parkins' documents all over hell! Look!"

Tate got up clumsily and stepped to his side. On the floor about the safe lay Parkins' papers, bills of sale, bills of lading and all other stuff which accumulates in a rancher's strong box.

"Looks like a cyclone hit it!" commented Tate. "What do yuh think?"

"I don't have t' think, Bull!" said Montana. "I can see with my eyes that some skunk has robbed the safe o' the payroll money! Somebody with that posse o' Kelton's! None o' our boys'd do a dirty trick like that!"

"Better look an' see what's missin'!" advised Tate. "Yuh want me t' call Margy?"

"No!" Montana exploded. "Don't let her know about it yet! The poor kid's got grief enough! I'll handle this, an' mark my words, Tate, I smell hell brewin' on the Pecos!"

He knelt down abruptly and went through the safe. His search brought

forth no payroll money. It had been stolen. He knew that! He gathered up the documents and carried them to the desk with a strange look on his face. Quickly he sorted them out and went through them. Then with a scowl he looked up at his friend.

"I knowed it, Tate!" he roared. "Shore as hell I guessed right! There's gonna be hell on the Pecos afore we're much older! Some dirty *orejana* didn't only steal the payroll money, but he walked off with the deed t' the Jay Bar Pee! Which-all gives me one big thought—Joe Carson!"

Tate arched his shaggy brows.

"Yuh mean he was here an' took it?" he inquired.

"Not exactly that, Tate!" the buckeroo flamed. "But whoever took that deed was plannin' on havin' Joe Carson register it in his name! Get me, Tate? Whoever took that deed has his eyes sot on ownin' the Jay Bar Pee an' only Joe Carson could change it an' make it look legal for a new owner!"

"Yuh think mebbe Kelton is the hombre?" asked Tate quietly.

"No," growled Montana. "He ain't got brains enough or the guts t' run agin me thataway. It was somebody in the Dawson crowd! Mebbe Dawson himself! But whoever it was that took it, Tate, he'll be showin' up here afore long t' claim his ownership o' the Jay Bar Pee! The whole damn thing smells o' Carson an' his skylarkin', don't it?"

"She shore does, Montany!" conceded Tate. "She shore does. What yuh aimin' t' do?"

"I'm headin' for Pecos an' Joe Carson's office as soon as we get our wind!" snorted Montana. "That's what I'm goin' t' do! We're gonna see if anybody's re-registered the Jay Bar Pee!"

"I don't reckon that'll be necessary, son," said Tate. "Ef anybody pulled a gag like that, he'll show up sooner or later an' claim the ranch by showin' his deed. Did Parkins leave a will in that heap o' paper?"

"No," said Montana. "If he did, it's gone! But I reckon he left the Jay Bar t' Margy, anyhow, an' nobody's gonna take it away from her! Not while I'm livin', they won't!"

"Hell!" Tate growled ominously. "Fust it was my lousy Los Dedos Ranch they was after, now it's the Jay Bar Pee, a spread wuth a fortune o' any gent's money! I don't reckon they'll bother with no small fry like me no more when they figger they kin cop off a spread like this without half tryin'! Yuh think it has anything t' do with Parkins' killin'?"

Montana shrugged. "Who knows?" he said. "Who knows what that Taos Dawson was thinkin' about when he come here? Mebbe he had it all figgered out in advance t' kill Parkins an' get that deed?"

"But Margy'd know her dad never sold the place!" Tate argued.

"Taos wouldn't let her stay around where she could cause him trouble!" said Montana. "She sensed they were going to get rid o' her! In fact she overheard Dawson say somethin' about sendin' her t' New Mexico. She warn't sure an' didn't wait t' make sure! She lit out first chance she got! But I'm tellin'

yuh, Tate, yuh better be prepared for more fightin' than we had over at Rustler's Roost two years ago! That Dawson bunch is tough! Yuh know that! An' if I don't miss my guess, he's the only one in the crowd with brains enough t' think they could steal the Jay Bar Pee!"

"I reckon yuh're right, there, Montany," said Tate. "He's a tough one, as tough as they come. He don't run with no shrinkin' vi'lets! Never did!"

"Anyway," Montana said in a lowered voice, "don't mention it t' Margy. I don't want no hysterics or nervous breakdowns. Sabe? Soon as we lay Jim away, we'll take her into town for a visit with Colonel Tip Collins an' his wife. They're close friends an'll look out for her. I don't want her on the Jay Bar when that *orejana* shows up. If he does, it's a cinch he won't come alone. She might get hurt. Comin' with me t' the bunkhouse?"

"Shore," Tate grunted, following him into the dining room. "Ef yuh need any money t' pay them twisters, I reckon I kin let yuh have any amount up t' ten thousand *pesos*. I got that much money in a belt under my shirt. Don't fergit it ef anything should happen t' me."

"Thanks, Tate," said the buckeroo with a grateful look. "I reckon I can take care o' the boys. I got enough o' my own money cached away t' pay 'em. How come yuh got all that *dinero* on yuh?"

"I was figgerin' t' pay fer them cattle o' mine," said Tate.

"Better not let any o' that *Santos Rojos* bunch know yuh got it," warned Montana, "or yuh're liable t' lose it plumb sudden-like!"

"They got a standin' invite t' try takin' it, son!" said the other. "I wisht they would! I'd have a damn good excuse t' kill about a dozen o' them includin' Taos Dawson an' yuhr onsociable sheriff!"

They went speedily to the bunkhouse where, with his own money, Montana paid the twisters and told them of the robbery. They went up in spirits immediately, but he cooled them off with an order that two pine-board boxes be built at once and two graves dug out on the knoll beside the resting place of Margy's mother. An hour later, the bodies of Jim Parkins and Charlie Sloane were placed in the boxes and carefully carried out to the graves.

CHAPTER XIII

THE last rock had been piled over the two graves and Montana was driving a carved marker at Jim Parkins' head when they heard the thud of hoofs coming from the direction of the highway. Margy, her eyes red and a look of deep sadness on her flushed face, looked anxiously at Montana. The buckeroo gave the grave-marker a final tap with the side of his

pick, dropped it and glanced narrowly at the approaching knot of riders who abruptly swung off the road and turned into the lane leading to the ranch house. There was something grim and ominous in the way they rode and Montana sensed trouble.

"Yuh better go back t' the house, Margy," he said quietly, "an' keep out o' sight. Them hombres ain't comin' t' pay us a social call. I smell trouble!"

"They got fight writ all over them, Montany!" commented Tate, loosening his guns in their holsters. "We'll see who they are in a jiffy!"

"Yes," said Margy with sudden coldness, "and I'm staying until they arrive! This is my ranch and I'm not going to get into the habit of running every time a strange rider comes up the lane!"

"I admire your pluck, maam," said Tate, appraising the riders. They were eight in number. The sun glistened suddenly on a bright bit of metal on the leader's vest-front, "but them hombres ain't strangers! Looks like the sheriff an' his posse!"

"Oh!" Margy clapped a hand to her mouth. "Do you think they will want to arrest me for—for shooting that dog of a Durango Kid?"

Montana's face hardened, but before he could speak, Monte Gordon stepped forward.

"Jes' let 'em try it, Miss Margy!" he said grimly. "Jes' let 'em try it! We'll ventilate that outfit so damn fast they won't know what struck 'em!"

"Yuh better let me handle this, Monte," warned Montana, "but yuh peelers keep yuhr eyes open an' be ready!" He turned abruptly to Margy. "Margy," he continued in soft tones, "I might as well tell yuh now as later. I didn't want t' ontil yuh had a good rest. But some dirty crook went through yuhr dad's safe an' stole the deed t' the Jay Bar Pee along with the payroll——"

"Stole the deed and the payroll money?" Margy cried.

"That's right, maam," said Montana. "The money ain't so important. But the deed is a hoss o' a different color. Tate an' I have talked it over an' both o' us agree that whoever took that deed done so with an eye on ownin' the Jay Bar! That's why I wanted yuh t' go t' the house an' keep out o' sight! Them jaspers rackin' up the lane might be comin' t' take possession of the ranch."

"Take possession?" Margy was startled, frightened. "How? Why, Montana, father didn't sell the ranch! They couldn't take possession unless he did sell it!"

"I know that, Margy," said the buckeroo, "but yuhr dad wouldn't have t' sell it. Now here's what I been figgerin'. Whoever took that deed had a good reason an' could see a way o' cashin' in on it. Now supposin' that crook got Joe Carson or somebody in the County Clerk's office t' register the deed in a new owner's name——?"

"It would be a forgery, Montana!" cried Margy, aghast. "The deed wouldn't be legal unless father had signed it!"

"Right yuh are," said Montana, "but forgery is Joe Carson's game! Tate

an' me caught him at it! If he forged a new deed t' the Jay Bar, it would be mighty hard t' prove that Parkins—yuhr dad—didn't legally sell the Jay Bar!"

"But I know he didn't sell it, Montana!" Margy insisted as the riders whirled into the ranch yard and headed toward them on the knoll. "He never would have sold it without telling me! That deed must have been stolen by somebody in Kelton's posse!"

"That's what I figgered," Montana stated, "but yuh better be prepared for a shock!"

"Yuh said it, Montany!" Tate growled suddenly, watching the approaching horsemen through narrowed eyes. "The leader o' that outfit is Taos Dawson hisself! Kelton ain't with him! Ef I don't miss my guess, Taos'll rack up here claimin' hisself the new owner o' the Jay Bar Pee an' all that's on it!"

The twisters edged forward restlessly, their hands hanging close to their gun-butts. Montana glanced at them out of the tails of his eyes and saw that they were ready for anything. He loosed his own gun and frowned at the coming men. The sun flashed again on the star which was pinned conspicuously on Taos Dawson's loud vest. The dive-keeping Chief Deputy seemed the personification of confidence and determination as he thundered up in the lead of the others and pulled his lathered horse down to a halt within a half dozen feet of Montana and Tate who had stepped up to meet them.

Dawson scowled at Margy, then looked at Tate. A great deal of his confidence left him instantly when he recognized the big man who had shot the fingers from his gun-hand once over in New Mexico. In its place sprang a look of hatred. His vicious little eyes glittered with murderous surprise. It was plain that he had not expected Montana and Tate on hand.

"Yuh—Tate?" he swallowed hard and cleared his throat. "Reckoned I'd find yuh over in the Los Dedos when I started lookin' fer yuh!"

"I'm saving yuh the trouble o' lookin', Taos!" Tate scowled back at him. "Better take a good look, hombre, fer ef yuh start anything here, it'll be yuhr last!"

"That so?" Dawson glowered, glancing over his shoulder at his followers. They were a hard-faced lot of gunmen and questionable characters and seemed ready to back up their leader in anything he might choose to start. "That so?" repeated Dawson. "The sheriff tol' me he ordered yuh an' Montana Larkin out o' Pecos County! How come yuh ain't sloped, hey?"

"Why do yuh think, Taos?" Montana thrust Margy behind him and advanced. "Case yuh don't know it, I'm Montana Larkin! By any chance yuh ain't sot on takin' up where Kelton left off, are yuh?"

Their eyes clashed for an instant. Twister hands closed about black gun-butts. The air seemed sudenly dangerous. Dawson's followers realized abruptly that they were outnumbered here and that the Jay Bar buckeroos were eager to start shooting. Already some of them had their guns half out. They looked to Dawson for guidance.

For a moment Dawson said nothing. During that time his beady eyes bored holes into the buckeroo before him. He sat his horse tensely.

"I'm waitin', Taos!" Montana flung up at him impatiently, his right hand curled over the butt of his .45 like the claw of an eagle. "Are yuh sot on takin' up where that skunk o' a Kelton left off?"

"Yuh're talkin' t' an officer o' the law, Larkin!" Dawson blustered truculently. "Be careful what yuh say fer it kin be used agin yuh!"

Tate laughed almost in his face.

"Officer o' the law, eh?" he roared. "That's one fer the book, Montany! What do yuh know about law, Taos?"

"Enough that when we git through with yuh, Tate," Dawson growled murderously, "yuh'll be hangin' frum a tree fer the murder o' Lafe Harper!"

Tate sobered instantly and glared at him.

"Murder, hey?" he bellowed. "So yuh're chargin' me with murder now so yuh kin keep me from holdin' the Los Dedos? Waal, Taos, ef yuh think it might help yuh, yuh kin go git me charged with the killin' o' the rest o' them Harpers! We got 'em all, Dawson! Every damn whelp o' that filthy litter including o' Kiowa! Put that in yuhr pipe an' smoke it! An' anytime yuh feel like arrestin' me, jes' start somethin'! Next time I pull hardware on yuh, Dawson, I won't shoot the gun from yuhr hand! I'll plant my slugs right atween yuhr eyes ef they's enough room there fer 'em!"

"We'll take that matter up later, Tate!" said Dawson boldly. "I warn't figgerin' on havin' no trouble jes' now! I come on private business. It was plumb onfortunate that Parkins had t' git hisself killed afore I tuck perssession o' the Jay Bar Pee, but that no way interferes with the deal I had with him t' buy this ranch——"

"What deal did you have with him to buy this ranch, Taos Dawson?" Margy, her eyes hard, her lips firmly compressed, stepped forward and confronted him.

"Why, maam," Dawson looked down at her from his horse, with feigned surprise. "Didn't yuh know yuhr dad sold me the Jay Bar, lock, stock an' barrel? I'm plumb surprised ef he didn't tell yuh! I shore am!"

"He told me nothing, Taos Dawson!" Margy cried at him. "He never sold you or anyone else the Jay Bar ranch! What have you got to prove that he did?"

"I've got the deed, maam," said Dawson promptly. "It's all made out an' legal, attested t' by a not'ry public, an' signed by Parkins hisself."

"So you've got the deed, Taos Dawson?" Margy fought hard to control herself. She looked at Montana and Tate. Their faces were hard. The twisters began mumbling dire things to themselves. "When is it dated, Taos Dawson?"

Dawson slipped the document from an inner pocket of his vest and nervously spread it out over his saddle horn to inspect it.

"April the tenth, maam," he said slowly. "That was four-five days ago!

Yuhr paw was in Pecos an' we had it made out then. I was t' take perssession t'day!"

Margy's mind raced swiftly. The deed was dated just two days prior to the ruthless murder of her father by the Durango Kid. And the day of his death had been the first time he had visited Pecos since the first of the month! She reasoned instantly that Dawson had purposely had his forged deed dated in advance of her father's death that there might be no question as to its legality.

"Taos Dawson!" she cried bitterly. "You are a liar! My father had not been in town this month until the day you came here with the Durango Kid and killed him! He never sold you the Jay Bar Ranch! You are trying to steal it on a forged deed! You stole the original deed and the ranch payroll money from the safe in the house! You are a liar and a thief, Taos Dawson! If I was a man, I'd pull you off that horse and beat the life out of you!"

She turned away and buried her head in her arms to hide a new flood of tears that welled up suddenly in her eyes. Montana looked coldly up at Dawson.

"Let's see that deed, Dawson!" he demanded, reaching up for it with his left hand. Tate edged closer, his big hands hanging within an inch of his gun-butts.

"Shore, Larkin!" Dawson replied promptly, handing the document down to him. "But hurry up an' read it! Arter yuh look it over, yuh kin pack up yuhr stuff an' slope offa the Jay Bar pronto! I'm takin' perssession t'day—right now—an' these gents with me air my new twisters! Yuh buckeroos now on the Jay Bar payroll air fired!"

"Fired hell!" spoke up Buff Anderson hostilely. "We done quit! Nobody but a lowdown road agent an' hoss thief'd work fer yuh, Dawson!"

"That's tellin' him, Buff!" growled Monte, his gun half out. "But yuh made a mistake! We ain't quittin' nor are we gonna be fired on his order! We're stickin' right on the Jay Bar Pee ontil he kin prove that deed ain't forged!"

"Yuh're damn right yuh're stickin' on the Jay Bar!" Montana swore viciously, glaring up at Dawson and shoving the spurious document inside his shirt. "I'm jes' keepin' this scrap o' paper myself, Dawson! It looks like a damn clever forgery t' me, even t' Jim Parkins' signature! I can't say whether or not Jim sold yuh the Jay Bar. But I don't think he did! Anyhow, I aim t' find out for certain! It looks like some o' Joe Carson's dirty pen-work an' I took special notice that he served as yuhr notary public an' done all registerin' in the deal!"

"Yuh gimme that deed, Larkin!" Dawson flared, his vein-laced face blue with fury. "Yuh cain't pull any o' that stuff on me! This is my ranch an' yuh're gittin' off! I'll git the sheriff t' come an' evict the whole caboodle o' yuh!"

"Don't make us laugh, Dawson!" Montana secretly hoped the man would go for his gun. But Dawson, seeing the deadly earnestness of Tate and the twisters behind him, was not ready to die yet. "When yuh can prove this

ranch was bought legal-like an' can produce a witness with better standin' in Pecos than a skunk," the buckeroo added, "we'll get off! But we ain't movin' on yuhr say an' Joe Carson's! *Sabe amigo?* As for Carson, I'm gonna corral him an' make him tell whether this deed is faked or not! If it is—an' I'm tellin' yuh t' yuhr face that I'm dead certain it is—yuh better hit the first trail out o' Pecos, for we'll be comin' after yuh a-foggin'! Now yuh take yuhr pack o' ghouls off this ranch afore we get mad an' blow yuh off!"

There followed a moment of indecision in which Dawson seemed to debate with himself whether to draw and start shooting, or back down and bide his time.

"Yuh're gunna play tough, hey?" he demanded suddenly, and his voice held more than an idle threat. "All right, Larkin! Go ahead an' git tough! It won't do yuh no good! I got a bunch o' friends due in Pecos on the evenin' train from N'Mexico! Yuh ain't got no more chance buckin' me than a snow ball has o' survivin' hell! I'm runnin' Pecos an' when I git through with yuh an' the rest o' the yokels here, yuh'll wisht yuh'd never been borned!"

"I wouldn't be too sure o' that, Dawson!" snapped Montana, his eyes blazing so fiercely now that they seemed to cast off sparks. "Yuh got jes' thirty seconds t' git out o' gun range afore we start shootin'!"

As if the buckeroos had been waiting for just such a signal, their guns flashed out. Dawson and his followers found themselves covered before they could bat an eye.

"Yuh'll git yuhrn, Larkin!" Dawson snorted viciously, wheeling his horse about. The others, decidedly gun-shy all of a sudden, clattered down the rise. "Shore as hell I'm gonna kill yuh the fust time I lay eyes on yuh! That goes fer yuh, also, Tate!"

"Yuh'll get that chance t'night, Dawson!" Montana jeered. "We'll be in the Red Onion by sundown should yuh feel like lookin' for us!"

He thundered down the slope and took after his men who lost no time in heading back to the lane. To increase his acceleration, Monte Gordon fanned his .45 after him. Dawson's hat flew from his head and plunked down in the dust of the yard. He did not stop to retrieve it. The twisters howled with amusement as he bent far over his saddle-horn and kept going. They watched grimly until the mob swung out of the lane and headed back toward Pecos at a fast gallop.

"From what that *orejana* said, Montany," remarked Tate, "Pecos is in for a heap o' trouble."

"Yuh mean from them friends o' Dawson's?" asked the buckeroo.

"Yes!" grunted Tate. "I used t' know Dawson's crowd over in New Mex! Skunk breed an' wuss! I reckon arter that evenin' train gits in, the town'll be plumb overrun with the scum o' the Canadian River kentry! I reckon we're gonna be dealers in gun smoke from now on, son!"

"*Bueno,* Tate!" the buckeroo scowled blackly after the retreating horsemen. "That's one game I ain't ever been beat at yet! We should have done a lot

o' promiscuous ventilatin' amongst that Dawson crowd an' saved us the trouble o' doin' it later! Runnin' Pecos, is he? Well, all I got t' say about that is —he's gonna get his horns knocked off plumb sudden!"

"Do you think Dawson robbed the safe, Montana?" Margy asked humbly.

"O' course I do!" Montana replied gruffly. "But what can yuh do about it when the sheriff's sittin' under his thumb? Now yuh run along back t' the house, Margy, an' get ready t' spend a few days with Colonel Tip an' his wife. We're takin' yuh there pronto an' I want yuh t' stay ontil things quiet down here. I reckon Dawson ain't givin' up easy. There'll be plenty of trouble. Yuh'll be safe with Colonel Collins."

"Whatever you say, Montana," she said meekly. "How soon are we leaving?"

"Jes' as soon as I can get the other boys in off the range!" said Montana grimly. "We'll slope soon as they get here. Things are shore gonna pop in Pecos t'night or I ain't got no smell for trouble!"

"You mean you are going to demand a showdown from Kelton and Dawson?"

"Nothin' less, *chiquita*!" he said firmly. "It's got t' be now or never! We got Dawson on the run right now an' I'm aimin' t' keep him runnin'! It's a game o' gun smoke now, Margy, an' the Jay Bar Pee is in the jack-pot! We're in it t' the finish!"

She bit her lips hard, looking at him. "I'd rather lose it a hundred times, Montana," she said finally, "than have you killed trying to hold it for me."

"Margy," said Montana earnestly. "If Dawson gets away with a deal like he's tryin' t' pull here, there won't be a ranch, a cow or a stick o' wood in the whole valley that he won't take! Pecos stands a big chance o' becomin' a second Rustlers' Roost! I don't need t' tell yuh what happened t' the Los Dedos Basin when outlaws took it over! The same thing can happen right here with Dawson an' Kelton runnin' the show! It's not only the Jay Bar that we're fightin' for now—it's the whole Pecos Valley! We got t' knock off Dawson's horns or else ——"

"Or else," Tate interjected abruptly, "git our own knocked off!"

Montana nodded gravely. "Or move out an' let Dawson's crowd move in!" he said.

"Oh, it doesn't look that serious," said Margy incredulously.

"No!" Montana snorted. "It didn't look serious t' the ranchers in the Los Dedos when the outlaws begain flockin' into Longhorn! They waited too long t' act, then found out all o' a sudden that it was too late t' do anything. The outlaws had 'em by the throat. Yuh know the rest. We're gonna act pronto! As for me, Margy, I ain't dead yet, but if my life'll stop them *orejanas* from stealin' the Jay Bar away from yuh, well, I've seen gents die with their boots on for a heap less than that!"

Tate and the twisters voiced their agreement with grunts of approval. Margy dropped her head sadly, grasped Montana's hand and pressed it warmly. She knew further argument with him would be futile and she sud-

denly recognized the wisdom of his words. Nothing in the Pecos Valley would be safe with Dawson and his crowd ranging it like a pack of mad wolves. They had to be stopped and Destiny seemed to point out Montana Larkin as the man to lead the way in the right direction. She took a last look at her father's grave and turned away, sobbing softly. They watched her go toward the house and there was not a man among them who would not gladly have laid down his life for her.

Montana glanced at Monte Gordon and spoke. "Monte," he said quietly, "yuh rack out an' round up the boys. Tell 'em what's happened an' I reckon they'll understand what's t' be done about it! We're gonna take Pecos t' the cleaners!"

Monte Gordon's eyes gleamed in anticipation of a wild night in Pecos. Before Margy reached the house, he was streaking hell-for-leather out toward the distant ranges. Solemnly the others gave a last look at the fresh graves and headed for the bunkhouse to snatch a brief rest while waiting for the twisters to ride in from their herds.

CHAPTER XIV

MONTANA LARKIN did not know exactly what to expect immediately upon entering Pecos. But on the way in he had reasoned with Tate that it would be much safer to avoid any encounters with Taos Dawson or Burt Kelton until after Margy had been placed under the watchful eyes of Colonel Tip and his motherly wife. It lacked an hour until sundown when they rode grimly into the outskirts of the town, followed by every buckeroo the Jay Bar could spare, and headed up a back alley toward the Collins home that stood in a grove of cottonwoods at the end of Main Street.

A strange, foreboding silence seemed to hang over the town, making itself felt strongly. The air was heavy and still and hot, like the dread, ominous moments preceding the bursting of a violent storm. Usually at that hour of the day, youngsters played run-sheep-run and other twilight games on the corners before being called off to bed. But now the alleys and side streets were deserted. Montana was quick to notice it and laid the early retreat of the kids to the fact that for several hours now black clouds had been gathering over the El Pasos threatening a thunder shower. But the pending storm was not the reason for their absence, however, and he was soon to know the truth.

In the alley behind the Red Onion, he halted suddenly and glanced over the grim faces of his buckeroos.

"I don't reckon yuh boys need go along t' Colonel Tip's place," he said quietly. "Wait for me in the Red Onion. But don't get plastered an' start anything. Somethin's brewin' in this town right now an' it ain't only a thunder storm! Whatever it is, she's gonna bust afore long. But don't start anything yuhrselves ontil we see who's in town. Remember, Dawson's got a lot o' straight-shootin' friends an' they might be here now. I can almost smell 'em! So watch yuhr step! Ef the boys from the Double O an' Circle X are here, wise 'em up t' the Jay Bar situation. I reckon we'll be needin' their help in handlin' that Dawson crowd. Tate an' me'll be along soon as we call on Joe Carson down at the courthouse."

"Okay, Montana," said Monte Gordon. "Yuh kin bank on us. As fer them Double O an' Circle X waddies, they're already wised up an' rarin' t' go skunk huntin'! Comin' in offa the range with the boys this afternoon we come by the highway an' met up with them waddies headin' fer town. They know everything an' ought t' be waitin' for us at the Red Onion now."

"So that's it, eh?" the buckeroo grunted. "Pecos already knows o' the killin' o' Parkins an' are keepin' their kids indoors expectin' lead t' start flyin'! That's why everything seems so quiet, like a keg o' dynamite afore it explodes! Well, yuh boys wait for us at the Red Onion an' stay t'gether!"

Thunder began rolling in the El Pasos as the twisters wheeled up a side street and vanished from view. No hilarious yelling and yipping from them this threatening Saturday evening. They rode toward the Red Onion warily, their faces grim and their hands always near their guns. Two score or more ponies stood at the hitchracks in front of the saloon when they rode up. Few persons were on the main street. Pecos seemed to have taken its tails between its legs and hunted holes, as it usually did when Montana Larkin went on the prod.

The few people out went about their affairs as if their lives depended upon haste. Thunder and lightning and an occasional splatter of rain coming down on their faces at a spiteful angle might have had something to do with it. But not altogether. The Double O and Circle X punchers had arrived in town comparatively early. From them Pecos learned for the first time of the ruthless killing of Jim Parkins and of Dawson's crude attempt to steal the Jay Bar Pee from his heirs. The news spread like wildfire as well it might, for Jim Parkins had been one of the town's first citizens. He and Colonel Tip and several others high in the esteem of the valley had pioneered Pecos. He was a pillar of decency and honesty and fair play—a milepost in the history of West Texas. His sudden passing at the hands of the degenerate, the Durango Kid, dealt the entire town a severe and unforgettable blow.

Pecos had been watching silently when Burt Kelton swore in Taos Dawson and the Durango Kid as his chief deputies. It watched and wondered and suspected the fermenting of trouble at its worst. Though filled with resent-

ment over the sheriff's poor judgment in the selection of deputies, folks in town simply sat back and twiddled their thumbs. They lacked the initiative to act of their own accord, and went in for watchful waiting, even as the citizens of Longhorn, later known as Rustlers' Roost, had waited years before when the outlaw element of the borderlands suddenly gripped them by the throat and throttled out their lives. They were quick to help others collectively and slow to aid themselves singly. An understanding of that sort of psychology was what made things so easy in the West for men like Taos Dawson, Billy the Kid, Marco Brett and others of their ilk. Men require a leader to bring out the best within them. Dawson was aware of that and he was aware that Pecos lacked the kind of a leader who could make it hard for him. That's why he called them yokels and set about to trim them.

And Taos Dawson had already started shearing the lambs. The day following the killing of Jim Parkins his men had held up both the incoming and outgoing stages high in the El Pasos. Both had been laden with gold—ingots headed for the bank and payroll cash going out for the miners. Taos Dawson believed in speed. *Manana* was not a word in his vocabulary. He had, however, remained away from the Los Dedos graft simply because he had come to look upon it as small fry in comparison with major campaigns he had in mind, for example, the ravaging of the gold-laden stages, the theft of the Jay Bar and the eventual robbery of the Pecos Bank. But he had his fingers in it, nevertheless.

While he planned his future, Pecos sat back inactively and watched him swagger about town like the cock of the walk, arrogant, overbearing, quick-tempered. Always his heels were dogged by several of his underdeputies. Of Burt Kelton the citizens saw little, but reports and rumors spoke for themselves. Taos and his henchmen took good care to keep him out of the way at the *Santos Rojos* where he was least likely to interfere with their trimming of the yokels.

But with the sudden news of Parkins' murder, Pecos began to wonder what Montana Larkin was going to do about it. He was engaged to marry Margy Parkins, wasn't he? If Jim Parkins had been foully murdered, it was the buckeroo's business to avenge his death and protect his intended bride from any such steal as the Double O and Circle X punchers had said Dawson was trying to pull on her! That's how they looked at it and they were right. But it never occurred to them that Montana Larkin might need their help in cleaning up Pecos as suddenly as it had been tainted. When the four o'clock train from the west rolled in and discharged some twenty hard-faced gun-toting passengers who immediately sought out Dawson at the *Santos Rojos,* the whole town began to expect lead to fly before the evening was over. In consequence the children had been called in early and those having business outside, finished it as quickly as possible, realizing that Montana Larkin might go on the prod at any moment and clutter up the air with flying death.

Montana and Tate wasted little time in escorting Margy to Colonel Tip's house. Nor did they tarry there long. Tip and his kindly wife had already heard of Parkins' demise and they were quick to voice their opinions of his murderer. They were a lovable old couple, both white-haired, who had come overland to the Pecos with the same bull train driven in by Parkins himself. Margy broke into tears the moment she saw Maw Collins and Tip planting a bed of flowers in the front yard, and ran into her plump arms.

"Take it easy now, Margy," the old lady soothed. "Don't go on a-cryin' like that. It won't do no good. This is a hard world, my dear, an' Jim got the best out o' it, I reckon, but not without his sorrows. You cain't laugh in this world ontil you have wept, Margy, an' you can never know real joy ontil you have felt the deepest sorrow. Now buck up. Put your pretty face in the sun an' hold up your chin. Jim don't want you t' grieve."

"I know he doesn't, Maw Collins," Margy sobbed, "but I just can't help it. Life seems so empty—so strange without him."

"There now, Margy," said Maw, winking at Montana. "I wouldn't say that. You went an' hurt Montany's feelin's. I reckon he aims t' fill your life with more joy an' happiness than you ever knowed afore!"

"That's my aim, maam," acknowledged Montana solemnly. "There ain't anything I wouldn't do t' make her happy."

"An' yuh're the gent what kin do it, son," avowed Colonel Tip, placing a gnarled hand on his shoulder. "I kin see love a-stickin' out o' yuhr eyes."

Montana looked at him grimly.

"Yuh an' Maw take good care o' her, Tip," he said. "Keep yuhr eyes on her. Never can tell what's liable t' happen. Well, I reckon Tate an' me have got plenty business t' do, so we'll be sayin' *hasta la vista* ontil we see yuh agin. In case yuh want me for anything, I'll be at the Red Onion or the *Santos Rojos*!"

"The *Santos Rojos*? Yuh goin' there?"

"Yuh bet I'm goin' there, Tip!" said Montana. "Tate an' me are goin' there for a showdown with Taos Dawson soon as I have a talk with Joe Carson about a deed I think he forged so Dawson could steal the Jay Bar Pee for Margy! We're gonna run that bunch out o' town t'night!"

"Yuh better go keerful, son," warned Tip, looking up suddenly at the sound of many hoofs coming toward town from the South Trail which led past the O Bar O ranch and on across the El Pasos into the Los Dedos. "That's a bad crowd at the *Santos Rojos*—mighty bad. I heard tell twenty gunmen came into town on the train this afternoon an' they all went straight t' Dawson's joint. I reckon Dawson must have brought 'em here. Looks like the O Bar O boys are in for their reg'lar weekly booze-fest!"

Montana looked toward the approaching riders. They thundered up to the yard where they stood, pulled out their pistols and began hurling lead at the black clouds that hung over the town, illuminated almost constantly

now by flickering lightning. They swept on past the Red Onion and turned into a side street to join the crowd gathering at the *Santos Rojos*. Behind them and riding more leisurely, came their boss, Jim Fannin, a thickly-jowled man with straw-colored hair, a big paunch, short, stubby legs and a dirty-tobacco-stained mouth.

Maw Collins took Margy by the arm as he rode up and paused to chat. She gave him a toss of her head and a swish of her voluminous skirts and started leading Margy houseward as if it were not safe for her to be in the presence of the rancher. But Margy turned back to Montana and ran into his arms. Fannin grinned at that, spat a stream of tobacco juice over his horse's head and sat staring down at her, his thick jaws working like a cow chewing its cud.

"Please be careful, *querido,*" she whispered into the buckeroo's ear. "Remember, I'm alone now except for you. If anything happened to you, Montana, why—why I'd just die."

"Don't worry, *chiquita,*" he breathed. "Nothing is going to happen t' me. I reckon I can take care o' myself with that spawn o' hell! Now yuh go inside. I didn't want Fannin or anyone else t' see yuh here. He might tell Kelton or Dawson! I'll tell him yuh're rackin' out right away. Now stay inside an' keep out o' sight. If anything happens, send word t' Tom Brennen at the Red Onion. He'll know where t' find me or Tate. *Buenos noches, chiquita!*"

"Good night, Montana," she whispered. "I will not rest until I hear from you!"

She would have clung to him indefinitely had not Maw Collins gently pulled her away. Together they went up the path in the yard and disappeared into the house. Fannin stared after them and spoke.

"That's Parkins' gal, ain't it?" he asked Collins, and Montana could almost read what his mind was thinking. "Damn purty filly, I'd say. Like t' have a gal like that waitin' on me ever' time I come home! Tough bein' a bachelor, Collins. Hell! All I got over at the O Bar O is a couple o' fat Comanche wenches that smell like a pair o' badgers!"

"I don't savvy how they kin stand it, Fannin," said Collins quietly.

"Oh, I'm used t' 'em—" Fannin began, and then gave a sudden start. "Say! What yuh mean how *they* kin stand it, hey?"

"Jes' what I said, Fannin!" retorted Tip hostilely. "An' us three gents got business t' talk over. It's plumb private, ef yuh savvy me."

"Shore, I *sabe,* Tip," Fannin growled. "Gittin' high-hat, huh? Okay! I'll slope! I'm in a hurry anyhow t' ketch up on my drinkin'. Drap inta the *Santos Rojos* an' we'll tip a couple."

He swung his horse about and trotted down the street, sitting his big saddle like a bump on a log.

"Ef he warn't so damn dumb he might have got mad at yuh, Collins," grinned Tate. "Yuh shore set that galoot in his place!"

"Dumb?" Colonel Tip scowled. "He's plain ignorant! Easy goin' when he's

sober, but a rattler when he's got a couple o' sheets in the wind. I don't cotton t' his kind nohow! They smell too bad!"

"Well, I reckon we'll be goin', Tip," said Montana solemnly, starting toward Skyrocket. Their horses were tethered to the white fence in front. "Now keep a close watch on Margy, will yuh? I didn't want Fannin t' see her, figgerin' he'd say something about her bein' here t' Kelton or Dawson. Them *orejanas* ain't t' be trusted an' Kelton's got his eyes on her. He might get it into his head t' pay yuh a visit!"

"He better not, Montany!" Tip growled. "Ef he does, I'll bull-whip him off'n the place!"

They shook hands all around. Montana and Tate then mounted quickly and followed Fannin down the street. Tip watched them go for a few seconds and then retreated into his house. Rain began falling in earnest as the buckeroo and his companion passed the Red Onion on their way to the courthouse. Thunder crashed like a battery of cannons and lightning stabbed the sky in sharp, jagged streaks. Far westward the sun broke through a mass of tumbling black clouds. Magically a rainbow appeared over the El Pasos and then the clouds overhead seemed to abruptly dump their contents over the town. The rain fell in a solid sheet. Montana and Tate were soaked to the skin by the time they reached the courthouse. But it was a warm, spring rain and it relieved them of some of their weariness.

The street was in puddles and water spouts on the buildings gurgled noisily as they drained into handy barrels. Still half full from the previous rain they soon ran over and the gutters transformed into muddy freshets. The thunder for a few moments was deafening and the lightning seemed to hiss like snakes. Then the deluge ceased as quickly as it had begun. High winds sent the clouds scudding southward and with them went the storm. The sun was low in the west and deckle-edged the sky with black and gold. Drenched, Montana and Tate reined up at the courthouse and stepped down in the mud. The place seemed totally deserted and they wondered if it had been closed up for the night.

They anchored their horses to the ground and stepped up to the door. It was not locked and they went in. Quickly they strode down the narrow corridor, eying two men who lolled against the wall along the sheriff's headquarters which were directly opposite the County Clerk's office. They stepped forward hostilely as they approached.

"Joe Carson in his office?" Montana inquired of them casually, instinct answering his own question.

"No he ain't in!" one of the men, a sad-eyed individual with a thin face and a crooked nose, stated abruptly. "What yuh want with him?"

"That ain't none o' yuhr business, hombre!" snapped Montana. "If he isn't in, where is he?"

"How should we know?" the other fellow growled, eying them with unmasked hostility. "Besides, we wouldn't tell yuh if we did!"

"That's what I figgered!" Montana stepped forward. "Dawson sent yuh here t' watch out for us. He knowed we was comin', an' yuh're supposed t' keep us from seein' Carson, eh? Git out o' the way! He's in his office, for I can smell him!"

The fellow made a clumsy dive for his gun, but the buckeroo was ready for him. In fact he had been expecting it. Quick as the lightning that was still flickering in the skies outside, his right fist shot out. Before the fellow had his gun half out, that fist sent him spinning down the corridor, with three of his yellow buck teeth knocked out. He landed on his back and lay still, blood dribbling from his cut lips. Like a flash the buckeroo whirled back to get at the other man. But Bull Tate already had him by the throat. With a quick, murderous thrust, the big man bashed his head against the wall, let him drop senseless and stepped back *clip-clopping* his hands.

"That's the way t' handle scum, Montany!" he chuckled. "No use wastin' lead on 'em!"

Montana grinned and tried the County Clerk's door. It was locked.

"Who is there?" came a pleasant voice from the inside. It was Georgia Cole's and it brought a bright smile to Tate's lips. But that voice was followed instantly by a low curse that identified Joe Carson. Montana and Tate exchanged nods.

"It's me—Bull Tate, maam!" Tate called back impetuously.

"This office is closed for the day!" Carson shot back. "Get out!"

"Open up this door, Carson!" Tate boomed with quick fury.

"Yuh go t' hell!" Carson flung back. "I said the office was closed!"

"Closed, yuhr aunt!" Tate bunched his muscles and hurled himself at the door. It gave in with a crash under his great weight. "She's open now, Carson! An' drop that gun!"

They stepped in promptly. Carson was standing in back of his rolltop desk, with a gun in his hand. One look at Tate's cold eyes and the gaping muzzles of his twin-sixes was enough to make him drop it.

"That's better, Carson!" the big man growled, glancing at Miss Cole who had been taking some sort of dictation and was seated in a chair beside his desk. Her eyes brightened and he grinned back. "Evenin', Georgie!" he greeted. "Has this big ape been annoyin' yuh?"

"No, he hasn't, Jack," she said readily. "Back so soon?"

"Yep!" Tate grunted, watching Carson out of the tails of his eyes. "Montany an' me got some business t' talk over with Carson, here." He swung on the clerk with fire in his eyes. "Thought yuh warn't in, Joe?"

"I ain't ever in t' yuh two jaspers!" Carson scowled, backing away. "What yuh want?"

"Yuh know what I want, Carson!" spoke up Montana coldly, advancing toward him. "An' yuh was expectin' me, wasn't yuh? Dawson told yuh I was aimin' t' corral yuh, didn't he?"

"I believe he did say yuh made some threats agin me, Larkin!" Carson sneered with mock courage.

"Bueno!" Montana shot back. "Then yuh know what I'm here for! We'll get right down t' brass tacks an' yuh better talk fast, Carson! I ain't in the mood for any stallin' an' the way I feel right now it wouldn't take more'n a fly-bite t' start me shootin' yuhr way!"

"If yuh're sore because Dawson bought the Jay Bar an' fired yuh," Carson snapped indiscreetly, "yuh won't git no sympathy from me! Now git out! We're busy reviewin' the week's business!"

Montana took another step forward. Miss Cole left her chair and slipped up beside Tate.

"Carson," Montana growled with fast-rising fury. "I'm givin' yuh one chance t' open up an' be decent for once in yuhr life! *Did yuh forge Dawson's deed t' the Jay Bar Pee?* Did yuh, or didn't yuh?"

Joe Carson looked at him for an instant like a man suddenly stricken dumb with fear. Then he licked his dry lips, coughed and cleared his throat. He tried hard to laugh insolently, but it just didn't come. It was a weak, dry cackle.

"O' course I didn't!" he managed to say finally. "What do yuh think this is—a clearin' house for crooked deeds?"

"I shore do, Carson!" Montana stormed. "I shore do! An' I'm tellin' yuh t' yuhr face that yuh're a low-livered liar an' a cheap, trick-penman! Yuh forged that deed, Carson! I know yuh did, for I compared Jim Parkins' signature t' specimens at the ranch! Yuh done a mighty good job, Carson, in duplicatin' Jim Parkins' name! But yuh plumb fergot one thing, Carson! Jes' one thing! Yuh fergot t' dot the *i* in Parkins, jes' like yuh fergot—or mebbe it's a habit with yuh—t' dot the *i's* in all yuhr other hand writin' on that deed! Now laugh that off, Joe! An' don't let yuhr face get so red! Yuh might ketch fire! I looked at a dozen different specimens o' Parkins' signature, an' not once did he ferget t' dot his *i*! He always poked a hole in the paper makin' it! Now, yuh ready t' admit yuh forged that deed, Carson, or will I have t' choke it out o' yuh?"

Joe Carson's face actually seemed ready to catch fire. It was the color of a sunburned apple. He bit his lips fiercely and tugged at his collar.

"I won't admit nothin'!" he snarled at length. "Yuh bull-dozed me once an' yuh cain't do it again! I'll have the law on yuh!"

"Dawson's law, eh?" Montana advanced another step. Carson's back bumped against the wall in a corner. "We're takin' care o' him an' his kind o' law jes' as soon as yuh write out a confession that yuh forged that Jay Bar deed! Sit down at yuhr desk, Carson, an' start writin'!"

"I won't do anything of the kind, Larkin!"

"Give him the works, Montany!" urged Tate, grinning down at Miss Cole. She seemed to be enjoying the clerk's fear and discomfiture. "He'll talk if yuh squeeze his neck a leetle!"

Montana needed no urging. Raging inside like an uncontrollable prairie fire, he reached forward and collared the clerk. With both his strong hands he shook him like a rat until his teeth rattled.

"Yuh gonna write that confession now, Joe?" he growled, shaking him relentlessly. "This is yuhr last chance! I'll choke the life out o' yuh!"

"I won't! Yuh get yuhr hands offa me!" Carson wheezed. "I'll kill yuh for ——"

Montana choked him off, twisted him around to his desk and bent him over it. With his right knee in his groin, he sank his fingers deeper. Carson's face went blue with strangulation. He struggled and wrenched, but he might just as well have tried to fight his way out of a vise. He waved his hands suddenly, gesturing that he wanted to speak. The buckeroo loosened his grip.

"Don't kill me!" Carson gulped air in great mouthfuls. "Don't kill me! I'll sign! I'll write! Anything! Only don't kill me!"

Tate laughed and nudged Miss Cole. She seemed to relax with a sigh, for she had expected to see murder done right before her eyes. But she was getting wise speedily in the ways of the West. No courts here to settle the differences of men. Fists and guns seemed to serve all purposes and she had to acknowledge even to herself that she admired the way men did things here, providing, of course, that they were in the right. And she was only too well aware of crookedness going on in the office of the County Clerk.

"Jes' write an' yuh'll live, Carson!" Montana thrust him into his chair and shoved pencil and paper before him. Carson ran a trembling hand through his tousled hair and snatched up the pencil as if he was going to swallow it whole. He pondered hesitantly for a brief moment until the buckeroo jabbed him in the ribs with his thumb. Carson jumped into motion as if he had been stabbed.

"What'll I write?" he demanded, breathing hard. "Yuh'll pay for this shake-down, too, Larkin!"

"Shet up!" Montana bellowed in his ear. "Yuh ain't got anything t' say t' me! Yuh're an expert at writin'! Now let's see yuh write out a confession that yuh an' Dawson forged the deed t' the Jay Bar, then sign yuhr brand on it. Miss Cole an' Tate here will witness yuhr signature! *Sabe amigo?*"

"What yuh goin' t' do with it after yuh get it?" whined Carson desperately. "Dawson's got the deed!"

"I got the deed, Carson!" hissed Montana. "Right here inside my shirt! As for yuhr confession—yuh want t' know what I'm goin' t' do with it, eh?"

"What?" Carson trembled.

"I'm gonna shove it in Dawson's face, Carson!" growled the buckeroo. "An' then I'm gonna turn it over t' the rangers so they can run yuh off t' jail! Now write!"

Carson wrote. He wasted no more time. He knew his back was against the wall and that obstinacy would be futile. Montana watched over his shoulder and read each word as he scrawled out his confession which was

in effect that he, Joe Carson, and Taos Dawson had connived and forged a deed to the Jay Bar Pee Ranch. Carson, ending his confession, hurled his pen aside and glared up at his tormentor.

"There, Larkin!" he growled. "Take it an' be damned t' yuh!"

"That's fine, Joe," Montana grinned. "But are yuh shore yuh ain't forgot anything? Or do yuh jes' want t' be reminded!"

He slapped the clerk soundly across the mouth with the back of his hand. Carson ducked and whined.

"I wrote what yuh wanted!" he mumbled. "Let me alone!"

"Sign yuhr name t' that paper, Carson!" Montana thundered. "Do yuh think I'm deaf, dumb an' blind? I bet yuh wouldn't even play square with yuhr own mother, yuh low-livered skunk!"

Nursing his lips, Carson turned promptly back to his confession. Cunningly he had left off his signature, but there would be no omitting it now. He scrawled his name at the bottom viciously and dropped his pencil.

"Heh! Heh! Heh!" he tried to laugh it off, but his split lips hurt. "Jes' an oversight, Larkin!"

"That's what the rat said when the cat caught it in the feed bin, Carson, if yuh believe in fables!" Montana jeered relentlessly. "We don't! Now step up here, Miss Cole. Yuh also, Tate! I want yuh t' witness this *orejana's* confession an' brand! Put yuhr names in the left bottom corner as witnesses!"

"With pleasure, Montany!" grinned Tate.

Miss Cole quickly added her signature to the document and Tate placed his own beneath it. Carson squirmed in his chair and tugged nervously at his collar.

"If yuh think yuhr collar's too tight, Joe," taunted Montana mirthlessly, "jes' wait ontil yuh feel a rope around yuhr neck! This confession's goin' t' hang yuh, Carson!"

"Don't rub it in, Larkin," Carson mumbled helplessly. "I've been a fool!"

Montana shoved the document inside his shirt.

"I ain't ever seen none bigger, *amigo!*" he jeered. "But I'm plumb glad yuh see yuhrself as others see yuh, an' I'm gonna offer yuh a chance t' get back on the right trail! Dig up the original Jay Bar deed that Dawson rustled off'n the ranch an' I'll give yuh an hour t' get out o' town! Is that fair?"

"Yuh mean yuh won't turn that confession over t' the rangers?" Carson whined plaintively.

"Not if yuh give me the original Jay Bar deed!" said Montana.

"An' yuh'll give me a chance t' get out o' Pecos?"

"Right!" said Montana. "Providin' yuh're plumb out o' town within an hour! If I run across yuh when we start cleanin' up Pecos, yuh'll look like any other crook t' me! I'll drill yuh on sight! An yuh don't need t' rack over t' yuhr cousins in the Los Dedos. Them Harpers ain't livin' there any more! They're plumb dead, Carson, like yuh'll be if yuh don't produce that deed an' slope pronto!"

"Dead?" Carson gasped incredulously, and he knew from the look in the buckeroo's eyes that he had spoken the truth. He lost no time in digging into some papers in a desk-drawer for the original Jay Bar deed. He handed it over meekly. "I was gonna tear this up," he added, "but somethin' told me t' hang onto it."

"Good thing yuh did, Joe!" Montana frowned at him narrowly. "It saved yuhr crooked life! Now git goin' an' don't stop!"

He did not hesitate, but as he slipped through the door a sneer spread over his face. Had they been able to see it, they would have known then and there that Joe Carson had no intentions of leaving Pecos just then. First he would tell Taos Dawson and his gathering gunmen that Montana Larkin was bent on cleaning up the town within an hour. That done, he would just wait in the *Santos Rojos* or in some safe hiding place for the smoke to clear away. Then, he expected Montana Larkin and Bull Tate would no longer be in the way. They would be dead and he would return to the office and continue with his crookedness. There was money in it! Much money! Hadn't Dawson told him so? But he had known that without being told.

"Well, I reckon that puts the Jay Bar Pee in good shape, Tate," Montana remarked suddenly. "I reckon Carson won't stop ontil he's clear out o' Texas!"

"I wouldn't be too sure of that, Mr. Larkin," said Miss Cole. "He's a very foxy man. I wouldn't trust him under any circumstances. By the way, I happened to be here when Dawson came to have the new Jay Bar deed prepared. He dropped this paper out of his pocket. I got it. Perhaps it will interest you and Miss Parkins."

She handed a sheet of wrinkled paper over to him. He took it and glanced over it swiftly.

"Shucks!" the buckeroo exploded abruptly. "It's Jim Parkins' last will an' testament! I was lookin' for that back at the ranch, maam! I'm shore grateful t' yuh!"

"I knew Dawson had no right to it when I saw what it was," she said, "so I kept it until I saw you again. You and Miss Margy share equally in the ranch, don't you?"

"Yeah," said the buckeroo, "that is, if we get married. If we don't, she gets it all. Don't matter, I reckon. We're gettin' hitched on June first!"

"Good!" Georgia ejaculated. "Congratulations!"

"Better wait ontil June fust fer that, maam," said Tate solemnly. "Not that I mean it won't come off, but Montany's got a lot o' dirty housecleanin' t' do afore then. We better get goin', son. The sooner Pecos is swept out, the safer it'll be for gals like Margy an' Miss—Georgia Cole, here!"

"You mean you are going to drive Dawson and his gunmen out of town tonight?" the girl gasped.

"The drivin' started with Carson, maam," said Tate, "an' ef I was yuh, I'd slope along home an' stay out o' danger. Yuh might get hurt. Ef yuh

ain't got nothin' more t' do here, yuh better go. The air in this town is gonna be thick with bullets afore long, or I ain't no guesser. We're goin' yuhr way an'll see yuh as far as the Red Onion. Yuh mind if I come an' see yuh t'night after the cleanin's finished?"

"I'll be glad to have you," she said, snatching up her coat and hat from a hook on the wall.

"Bueno!" Tate boomed jubilantly. "Then it's a date! I'll be there with bells on, maam!"

CHAPTER XV

THE two men who had resisted them in the corridor were gone when they stepped out of the County Clerk's office. The hall was deserted. They went swiftly to the main entrance of the building, Miss Cole with them. The rain had stopped altogether now and the sun was half hidden behind the western foothills. Distant peals of thunder crashed dully as the storm swept southward toward the Rio Grande. The sky was clearing rapidly and the sun seemed to be dropping out of sight in an infinite sea of gold. The streets were in puddles, needing only traffic to transform them into streams of ankle-deep mud.

"Jes' stand on the boardwalk, maam," Tate said to the girl, "ontil I git on my hoss, then I'll boost yuh up an' ride yuh home. Yuh'd sink t' the hocks in the mud tryin' t' cross the street corners."

They mounted hastily and Tate swung her up on his knee. It was the first time Georgia Cole had ever ridden a horse and she liked it. Furthermore, she discovered suddenly that she liked even better to be close to the big man who held her clutched tightly to him. She wondered how he could hold her there with as little effort as he might hold a feather pillow. They rode abreast up the street and the only sounds they heard were the soft *schuck-schuck-schucks* of the horses' hoofs in the mud.

But affairs were developing swiftly at the *Santos Rojos*. Carson lost no time in getting there and while Montana and Tate were delivering Georgia at her doorstep, he unburdened his tale of woe to Taos Dawson in a small back room which served as the gunman's office.

"An' so," he told Dawson excitedly in conclusion, "we lost the Jay Bar Pee more pronto than we got it, Taos! An' that Larkin hombre made me sign a confession that yuh' an' me forged that deed! I couldn't do nothin' but sign! They had me dead t' rights an' would have killed me if I'd refused!"

"Hell!" Taos stormed fiercely. "Yuh're too damn lily-livered, Carson, t' let

'em get away with that! Yuh ain't got the guts o' a rock lizard! Why didn't yuh put up a fight?"

"Fight?" Carson licked his cut, swollen lips. "How could I when that Bull Tate jasper had me covered with his twin hoglegs? I reckon yuh'd have licked 'em with one hand, eh, Taos?"

His bitter sarcasm made Dawson glare at him hostilely for an instant.

"Yuh're damn right I would!" he sneered finally. "No damn jasper kin skeer me with a name! *Senor Satan!* Hoss feathers! Like as not Tate pinned that brand on hisself! Who'd he ever kill that amounted t' anything? Tell me that, Carson! A couple o' yokels, mebbe, an' a few greasers! But no real fighters like me! I'm one gent he won't git past!"

Battered and scared as he was, Joe Carson was forced to smile at the other's personal egotism.

"I take notice he left his brand on yuhr hand an' in yuhr belly, Taos," he said simply.

"That was luck!" Dawson lied truculently. "Plumb luck! It never woulda happened ef he hadn't drawed on me when I warn't lookin'! The trouble with yuh an' Kelton an' the other yokels o' this burgh is that yuh're yaller! Jes' watch Taos Dawson's smoke from now on, Carson! I'm gunna make it so damn hot in this town fer Montana Larkin an' Bull Tate that they'll think they're in hell! They cain't skeer me! Where are they now?"

"I left 'em at the office," said Carson nervously. "I didn't waste no time gittin' here. They beat up the two jaspers yuh sent t' keep 'em out."

"Yeah," growled Dawson. "Damn near killed 'em. But I warn't figgerin' on Tate comin' with Larkin. Reckon Steve an' Pete could handle him. But jes' wait ontil we get our hands on 'em!"

"We won't have long t' wait, I reckon," Carson fidgeted restlessly. "They're aimin' t' clean up Pecos within an hour! Leastaways, that's how I savvied it when Larkin gave me an hour t' git out o' town an' said that if he crossed my trail when they started cleanin' up on yuh, he'd kill me on sight!"

"So they're gunna try t' clean up on me, eh?" Dawson blustered. "Why didn't yuh tell me that fust instead o' snivelin' about the smack in the mouth yuh got? But I was expectin' 'em t' start somethin' like that an' I'm ready fer 'em! I got twenty friends from N' Mexico here now! Jes' let 'em start anything! We'll ventilate 'em so damn quick they'll think they're sponges. Them twenty jaspers that arrove t'day air equal t' a dozen Senor Satans an' Montana Larkins!"

"Mebbe so, Taos," said Carson, "but did yuh know that when the Jay Bar Pee gits into a scrap, the Double O an' the Circle X spreads throw in with 'em? They're all at the Red Onion right now, but I reckon they won't be there long. They'll be headin' in a bunch for the *Santos Rojos.* Yuh better watch out Them Double O waddies shore know how t' sling hot lead an' I reckon the Jay Bar twisters ain't slouches either!"

"No, an' neither is Fannin's outfit!" Dawson growled. "Fannin's here with his boys—fifteen o' them! They been itchin' for a chance t' tear into them Double O jaspers! Larkin wouldn't have the chance o' a snowball in hell ef he comes here! The *Santos Rojos* is packed t'night, Carson, an' every jasper here kin be depended on t' sling lead fer me! Let 'em come! Ef they want a war, we'll give it t' em! They ain't gonna skeer me out with no threats! I'm used t' 'em, an' the sooner we get rid o' Larkin an' Tate, the quicker we'll git rich! Come on out in the saloon! I'm gunna wise up my friends an' get 'em set! That Larkin's a false alarm, Carson, but I ain't takin' no chances! Come on!"

The *Santos Rojos*, despite the early hour, was jammed almost to the doors. But that was nothing new for Dawson's joint. Things started early and moved swiftly there on Saturday night, particularly after payday. It was not quite as spacious a saloon as the Red Onion, nor as elaborately equipped. But its capacity was being taxed almost to the limit now and it might have been the spawning place of hell. Certainly the spawn of hell was there. Men of the lowest stamp stood three deep at the pine-board bar and drank the cheap, rotten whiskey three sweating bartenders handed out in a steady amber stream.

The air was thick with tobacco smoke which mixed offensively with the smell of sour sweat, spilled liquor and the rank, odorous perfume of the painted entertainers who circulated about in fair numbers. The heavy, sodden laughter of drink-stupid men and the shrill voices of the janes who catered to their desires added to the din set up by a tinny, tuneless hurdy-gurdy that was going full blast in a crowded corner. Tables and games of chance were everywhere except for a small ten by ten space in the center of the sawdust-covered floor which was devoted to dancing, such as it was. Even that space was filled with whirling, hilarious men and their painted, laughing dance partners.

Rough, uncouth miners and muckers, in from the outlying mines for their weekly bout with vice, mingled with carefree cow punchers and twisters of shady character, their red shirts and bright mackinaws giving a wide variety of colors to the scene. Hard men all, but ordinarily a good many of them would awaken in the back alley sometime before dawn, wondering how they had gotten there and why their pockets were turned inside out. It was the indoor sport of the janes to put knockout drops in their drinks and then have them thrown into the alley where Dawson's squad of pocket-pickers relieved them of whatever cash and valuables they might still possess. A tough joint, the *Santos Rojos*. But no tougher than the men who went there to carouse.

Fist and gunfights were frequent, flaring up where least expected. A curse, the bumping of an elbow or the offensive trampling of a toe invariably meant bloodshed. If not with guns or concealed blades, it was fists. But Big

Jake Slade, the official bouncer and as large a man as Tate any day, was an advanced artist at handling such sudden outbursts of human fury. He circulated about the place freely, like a man-killing wolf, always looking for new fields to conquer. A fight was like meat and bread to him. He loved it and never overlooked an opportunity to show off his physical prowess. He loved, among other things, to see the blood splatter when he drove his ham-like fists into some luckless miscreant's mouth.

With Carson trailing at his heels, Taos Dawson shouldered his way roughly through the crowd. Men gave way before him, for they knew his quick temper. He went straight to a corner where four tables had been reserved for his gunmen friends imported from the Canadian River country. Close at hand, Jim Fannin, half drunk now and getting loud and surly, sat in a poker game with Sheriff Burt Kelton and several other men whose faces were inscrutable in the dense clouds of tobacco smoke that hovered over them.

"Yessir!" Fannin was growling to all who cared to listen to him. "Thet Tip Collins is gittin' too damn high-hat fer me! He allus wuz uppish—him an' his fat wench! Someday, I'm gunna git real mad at him! When I do I'll rip his belly open an' see what makes him so all-fired high'n mighty! But say, gents, hev' yuh seed that Parkins gal o' late? She's so damn purty that all I kin see is a pitcher afore my eyes! Gawd! If I only had her at the O Bar O! I'd give her a lovin' she'd never fergit!"

Kelton, just drunk enough to make him amorous and ugly, looked up from his cards intently.

"Where'd yuh see her, Fannin?" he inquired casually. "She in town?"

"Shore she's in town!" Fannin growled. "That's what I'm tryin' t' tell yuh, ain't it? She must be stoppin' t'night at Tip's shack. That's where I seed her an' she was a-bellerin' like a sick calf on that Montany Larkin's manly boozem. I reckon she was bellerin' over her ol' man gittin' his horns knocked off!"

"Yuh mean yuh saw Larkin with her, Fannin?" Kelton grew tense.

"Yup!" Fannin said stupidly. "An' they wuz a big jasper name o' Tate with him. I didn't like his looks!"

"Thanks, Fannin," the sheriff threw down his cards, raked in his money, which, incidentally, was the last of his share of the proceeds of Dawson's sudden stage-robbing spree, and stood up. "I'm out, but I'll be seein' yuh later!"

"Where yuh goin'?" inquired Fannin, looking up at him dazedly.

"Yuh'd be surprised, Fannin!" said Burt with a grin. "I might do a leetle visitin'!"

Fannin stared at him stupidly for an instant and then turned back to the game. The moment he stood up, Kelton spotted Dawson approaching through the crowd. He advanced to meet him.

"Larkin an' Tate's in town, Taos!" he said bluntly. "It's our ——"

"I know it, Kelton!" growled Dawson viciously. "G'wan back t' sleep, sheriff! Hell o' a lot o' good yuh are! Now ef yuh wuz on yuhr damn toes like I am, yuh'd a-knowed it a' hour ago! Pull up behind me an' listen t' what I tell my friends frum back home!"

He pushed himself past the sheriff and made his way to the men sitting at the four tables, drinking and gambling quietly. Kelton and Carson fell in behind him and pulled up when he stopped. He halted at the nearest table and bent over to speak to its occupants. Like the other men about them, they were hard-eyed border gunmen. No greater assortment of human vultures and killers had ever assembled outside of a prison. Many of them bore the scars of past gunfights and they ranged in years from possibly twenty-five to fifty.

"She's stackin' up fer a big night, fellers!" Dawson said, and Kelton had to listen close to hear his voice above the general tumult in the saloon. "I didn't expect it so damn quick, but she's started, an' we got work t' do! Arter its done, we'll git down t' real business an' start workin' on this town!"

"*Que pasa,* Taos?" grunted the man nearest to him. "What's up? Anything interferin' with yuhr plans?"

"Plenty, Hefney! Plenty!" Dawson growled. "A couple o' jaspers with a grudge again' us, have started a clean-up movement in Pecos! Yuh might know one o' them—he calls hisself Senor Satan."

"*Senor Satan?*" Hefney arched his beetling brows. "Yuh mean Bull Tate?"

"Yeah," said Dawson. "He's one o' them. The other feller is Montana Larkin, a buckeroo what thinks he's tough!"

"I know that Tate hombre, Taos," said Hefney, exchanging looks with his companions, "an' I wish I didn't! Ran into him once over in Silver City! Say! He ain't the jasper that shot yuh up, is he?"

"The same!" growled Dawson. "Damn his guts!"

"What's he doin' over here now?" asked one of the other men.

"Settlin' down over in the Los Dedos!" said Dawson. "We was tryin' t' git his ranch away frum him, but we'll git it now that yuh-all air here backin' me up. Plenty o' graft in this burgh, ef yuh know what I mean. But gittin' down t' cases, this Tate an' Larkin air a-comin' here pronto t' clean us up! Carson jes' brung me the dope! They're up at the Red Onion now gittin' ready t' start cleanin'. We got t' sort o' give 'em a reception party when they come t' the *Santos Rojos*! They got t' be clear wiped out, hombres! No two ways about it! Ef we're gunna make a payin' propersition out o' this town, we got t' git rid o' them jaspers plumb pronto. *Sabe, amigos?*"

"Shore we savvy, Dawson," said Hefney uneasily. "But how many gents in this Larkin-Tate combination?"

"Cain't be more'n thirty-forty, but they're all yokels, Hef!" said Taos. "Hell! We kin handle them with our eyes shet! Besides, they ain't a gent in my place right now that won't throw his gun fer me! Even the sheriff here! Where air yuh, Burt?"

"Right here, Taos!" Kelton shoved his way in with sudden importance. "So the worm has turned?"

"Turned but we're gunna step on it, Burt!" Dawson growled. "Yuh heard what I said, didn't yuh?"

"Yeah," said Burt narrowly. "An' I don't like its looks. Them Jay Bar twisters might be sassy, but they kin fight! An' so kin their friends. I——"

"Air yuh with us or ain't yuh, Kelton?" Dawson flared. "Ef yuh ain't, g'wan back t' sleep an' keep yuhr snout out o' it! Yuh might git in the way o' *a* bullet!"

"Yuh mean yuh'd like to plug me, eh, Taos?" Kelton whined. "But don't do it! They'd get a new sheriff an' yuh'd be out o' luck!"

"Nobody said anything like that!" sneered Taos. "I warn't even thinkin' it!" But drunk as he was, Kelton knew better. Taos already had plans in his keeping for electing himself as sheriff. He continued. "Now listen t' me, Burt!" he said. "We're in this thing an' we ain't lettin' Montana Larkin run us out! If he does, yuh go with us! Sabe? He'd as soon drill yuh as not! But we got t' git busy! Them jaspers might come any minute! I want yuh all t' find places where yuh kin watch the door. When Larkin an' Tate come in here, plug 'em on the spot! Blow 'em t' hell! I don't care, jes' so yuh git 'em!"

"Shore!" said Hefney. Kelton said nothing, but looked about for some obscure exit. "Shore, we savvy," continued Hefney. "I'll pass the word along! Yuh ain't got nothin' t' worry about, Taos! Yuh know us!"

"It'll be yuhr funeral as well as mine if we blow up, Hefney," said Dawson fiercely. "I'll tell the crowd that the Red Onion bunch is comin' here fer a fight! That'll put 'em on our side if nothin' else will!"

Without hesitation he stepped up onto the table, pulled out one of his guns and fired three times into the ceiling. Instantly the place became quiet. Men simply froze in their tracks as if afraid to move lest they run into a cross fire of two gun-fighting revelers. They could scarcely have found cover had they tried. The place was too crowded. But somehow Jake Slade went through the mob like a locomotive. Men crowded forward.

"Oh, it's yuh, Taos?" he said, halting before him.

"Shut off that damn hurdy-gurdy, Jake!" Taos ordered. "I want t' talk!"

With his same charging tactics, Slade smashed his way to the offending instrument and shut it off. Stone silence spread over the room.

"Hombres!" Taos Dawson's voice broke high and clear over the gathering. "Pecos has gone an' got itself religion, b'lieve it or not! Two hombres, Montana Larkin an' Bull Tate, which our good sheriff ain't been able t' handle, have got behind a movement t' clean this town up, as if it needed cleanin'! Right now, they might be on their way t' the *Santos Rojos* lookin' fer a fight! As Chief Deputy Sheriff, in behalf o' our liberal friend, Sheriff Burt Kelton, I'm askin' yuh all t' stand behind us as sort o' deppities an' show them

jaspers up! Ef we don't lick 'em t' a finish, it'll mean that the *Santos Rojos*'ll have t' shet down! They ain't none o' yuh welcome at the Red Onion, an yuh'd be left without a place t' have yuhr fun! The clean-up party is at the Red Onion now gittin' its bowels in a' uproar fer startin' the fireworks! Are yuh gonna let 'em run us all out o' town, or are yuh gunna fight fer yuhr rights t' life an' liberty? Our liberal sheriff stands right by me here ready t' back us up agin them cheap pilgrims! Step up here, Burt, an' tell the crowd jes' what yuh think o' them long-haired jackasses what are bein' led around by the nose by that whelp, Montany Larkin! Tell 'em we're gunna knock off their horns soon as they show up here, Burt!"

He looked around for Kelton. But the sheriff had magically vanished. Even as Taos had brushed past him to mount the table, he had slipped away to make a hasty exit through the rear door. He had no intentions of being present when Montana Larkin appeared at the *Santos Rojos* with his clean-up committee. Somebody would get hurt and he had made up his mind that it wouldn't be him. He had no stomach for the buckeroo's kind of fighting and he knew the causes behind his so-called clean-up movement. If Montana Larkin was coming to the *Santos Rojos,* it was because he wanted a showdown on the Jay Bar Pee matter and not because he simply wanted to see Pecos white-washed. So Burt quietly skipped out despite the fact that he would liked to have remained to see the buckeroo get his horns clipped by Dawson's imported gunmen. But he had other plans for his evening's amusement, since hearing Jim Fannin tell of Margy Parkins' presence in town.

Dawson was quick to see that he was gone. His face reddened a bit and he looked back on the crowd.

"Heh! Heh! Heh!" he laughed. "I reckon Burt jes' slipped out a minute. But it's okay, hombres! He'll be right back t' help us fight that Red Onion crowd! Yuh with us, or do yuh want t' be deprived o' a place t' drink an' enjoy yuhr wimmen?"

"We'll shoot 'em t' hell, Taos!" a burly puncher from the O Bar O shouted drunkenly. "I know that crowd! They'll have the Double O waddies with 'em! Hooray an' a couple o' yips! She's stackin' up fer a big night! Let's give 'em holy hell, fellers, an' make 'em run fer their holes!"

The other O Bar O punchers took up the cry which aroused Fannin from his half-drunken stupor. They heard his heavy voice booming out encouragingly and presently the place roared with resentment against Montana Larkin and all that he represented. Even the janes joined in, for they knew that if Taos Dawson was run out of town, they too, would have to go. The imported gunmen, however, were made conspicuous by their deadly silence. They were nevertheless determined to allow nothing to interfere with Dawson's plans for making them rich. Taos was working a profitable game here and they were to a man resolved to let no man or number of men come between him and his sources of revenue.

CHAPTER XVI

But Montana Larkin and Bull Tate were not at the Red Onion just then working up sufficient courage to visit the *Santos Rojos* as Taos Dawson had so inelegantly declared. They were right there, standing, casually with their backs to the bar facing the gathering, and arranged on either side of them stood the hard-riding buckeroos from the Jay Bar and the punchers from the Double O and the Circle X. The assembly in the *Santos Rojos* had been so intent upon listening to Taos Dawson that they had not observed the new entrants. If they had, it would have made little difference, for those who favored the *Santos Rojos* seldom had the opportunity to meet face to face the proud patrons of the Red Onion. Even Taos had failed to see them, for the smoke was so thick in the place that faces were blurry at a dozen feet.

After leaving the courthouse, Montana had permitted no grass to grow under his feet. While Tate hastily rode Georgia to her boarding house, he went into the Red Onion where he found his twisters and the punchers from the other two ranches waiting quietly for him. He lost no time in feeling them out and quickly discovered that they were eager for a visit to the *Santos Rojos.* To most of them it was simply the beginning of a big night, but to Montana it was something more. The outcome meant the return of law and order to Pecos and the re-establishment of peace and tranquillity on the Jay Bar Pee. He felt that as long as Taos Dawson and Burt Kelton controlled the sheriff's office, the Jay Bar would suffer. He meant to put an abrupt end to that suffering now. If *Manana* meant nothing to Taos Dawson, it meant less to Montana Larkin. He, too, believed in doing things now —not tomorrow! And Bull Tate was of the same belief. He had hurried back to the Red Onion, arriving just as the buckeroo was leading the clean-up committee to its horses.

In silence they had ridden down the main street, passed the courthouse and turned into a narrow alley that led directly to the *Santos Rojos.* There in the alley they had left their horses and continued the balance of the distance on foot. But on reaching the *Santos Rojos* they had not expected such an easy admission. They had anticipated trouble from the start. Fortunately at that moment, Taos Dawson was regaling his patrons and his friends from the table. Slipping inside quietly they had taken up their positions along the bar and only the bartenders knew that they were there for more than a drink.

But they were silenced quickly by menacing guns held in the hands of Pinto Bogue, Monte Gordon and a yellow-haired puncher from the Circle X.

As Taos started to step down from the table, Montana drew his gun and fired abruptly. The egotistic Mr. Dawson ducked instantly as the wind from the slug fanned his face. The tumult in the place died immediately and men turned dumbfounded toward the bar.

"That was a right purty speech, Dawson," the buckeroo jeered at him coldly, "but yuh're a heap better liar than yuh are a' orator! Jes' stand where yuh're at on that table so I can see yuh! An' don't make a move for yuhr guns! Yuh're covered!"

"They hev' come!" Dawson screeched in an excited tone. "Get 'em, hombres! It's Montany Larkin an' his clean-up committee!"

Guns flashed out along the bar. The miners, unarmed generally, fell back and so jammed the O Bar O punchers that they were packed in the mob like sardines. Tate laughed satanically.

"Listen t' me, yuh jaspers from the mines!" he bellowed. "We ain't got no fight with yuh an' we air givin' yuh a chance t' back out o' here! We didn't come t' the *Santos Rojos* t' take yuhr scalps! We didn't come here t' interfere with yuhr fun. But we did come t' knock the horns offa Taos Dawson an' his kind! Them jaspers air jes' tryin' t' use yuh in fightin' us fer their own gain! O' course ef yuh want t' stay here an' go t' Boothill with 'em, its okay with us! Ain't it, Montany?"

"Yuh said it, Tate!" growled the buckeroo, watching Dawson intently. He saw him glance back over his shoulder to see what his imported gunmen were doing. They were edging around the sides of the mob now, advancing slowly and quietly to the forefront. "Yuh said it, Tate!" Montana repeated out of the side of his mouth. "Watch them jaspers sneakin' around the sides o' the crowd!"

Tate had seen the movement and grinned.

"I see 'em, son," he said, raising his voice again to the mob. "Hombres," he continued, "hell's gunna bust loose any second now! Any o' yuh gents not wishin' t' git ventilated, jes' slide out the door an' slope! When we start shootin', yuh'll all look like Taos Dawson t' us! We're startin' when I count off five! One—two ——"

At the count of *two*, Taos Dawson received the shock of his life, unquestionably. There was a mad scramble for the doors and windows. The miners and muckers upon whom he thought he could rely to stand by him in a pinch, suddenly became thoroughly gun-shy. They carried windows and doors and everything else with them in their mad rush to safety. Into the street the *Santos Rojos* vomited humanity. The janes started screaming and were trampled underfoot. Some of them got out. Others ran hysterically to a flight of rickety stairs that led up to their vile rooms on the second floor. Montana caught a sudden glimpse of Joe Carson and his face flamed. The clerk was trying desperately to beat his way to an exit.

"Stay where yuh are, Carson!" he flipped up his gun, and only a miracle saved Joe Carson's life just then.

Carson halted in his tracks as if he had been shot, and sent a look of fright toward the bar.

"I'm leavin' town, Larkin!" he said desperately.

"Like hell yuh are, Carson!" Tate flung at him, and his right pistol shot up. "Yuh had yuhr chance! Instead o' takin' it, yuh beat it here t' warn Dawson that we was comin' arter him. Go for yuhr gun, Carson!"

But Carson refused to invite death that way. He made a sudden dive to get under the table upon which Dawson stood expecting to be shot at any instant. He missed the space between the table-legs. Instantly Dawson was sent sprawling. He fell across the backs of a half dozen O Bar O punchers who stood in a group about Fannin. They shook him off. Taking the opportunity to draw his gun, he rolled aside and started shooting.

Instantly the *Santos Rojos* became a place of wild bedlam. The last of the miners managed to get out, leaving the O Bar O punchers behind them. Standing along the walls now stood the imported gunmen. Jim Fannin leaped up from his seat and started shooting blindly. One of his own bullets dropped an O Bar O waddy before he could fire his gun. Dawson, squatting behind an overturned table, fired at Tate and missed. His bullet crashed into a row of whiskey bottles on a shelf behind the bar. Then his friends from the Canadian River started hurling lead in deadly earnest. Pinto Bogue went down under their first volley, but not before he dropped one of them. Even as he felt a slug ripping through his stomach, his cocked gun exploded. The bullet caught a tall, raw-boned desperado in the neck. The gunman dropped without a sound, his head twisted sideways in a grotesque attitude of death.

Montana Larkin had expected few preliminaries before the fireworks began. He knew beforehand that Dawson and his henchmen would start shooting the moment he was seen in the *Santos Rojos*. But in going there the buckeroo had secretly hoped to prevent as much bloodshed as possible, thinking only to get Dawson and Kelton, the latter if necessary, and then herd the others to the depot and force them to take the first train out of town. A train was due just after dark, heading west. But as the fight settled down to a factional duel of six-guns, he knew that a good many of them would miss that train.

The ancient feud between the punchers of the Double O and the O Bar O seemed suddenly to burst wide open. They seemed to become abruptly oblivious to everything else but the fact that old enemies stood opposite them. At close range they pumped lead at each other and died game. But sadly outnumbered, the O Bar O riders took it and never whimpered, not even when Fannin took a slug in his fat belly and started running in circles, squealing like a stuck pig. He crashed down suddenly, his short, stubby legs shorn of their supporting power. For a moment he lay groveling in agony and then presently he appeared to stretch out and lay still.

Twice in quick succession Montana's gun barked, once at Joe Carson and

the second time at Jake Slade. He had a sudden glimpse of the crooked clerk as he attempted to take a pot-shot at him from the floor. He nailed him squarely between the eyes. Carson never knew what struck him. His second shot smashed into Slade's chest, a hard target to miss, huge as it was. A red stain appeared instantly on the bouncer's shirt-front, just even with his heart. He let out a bullish roar and went wabbling away to collide blindly with a wall. He fell backwards, flat on his back and died with his murderous heart drilled dead center.

Tate, his twin sixes working like pistons, kept an eye open for Dawson. So swiftly did he pump lead that for a moment the imported gunmen were bewildered. They dropped like flies and with the last shot in his left-hand gun, he dropped Hefney. The desperado tried to get in a dying shot at him. Tate flipped his right gun his way and it roared. Before Hefney could shoot, he shot the top of his head away. Suddenly he caught a glimpse of Dawson as he scrambled out from behind his overturned table to make a dive for another. His gun clicked empty. He swore roundly and started to reload, with lead whining deadly songs about his head. But he paid no more attention to them than he would a swarm of mosquitoes. He never betrayed a thought of getting hit and he knew that the only slug you fail to hear is the one that gets you. The others did not matter.

He was back in action in a jiffy. But Montana Larkin and his Jay Bar twisters in the meantime had sadly decimated the imported gunmen. While the Double O and Circle X punchers fought the waddies from Fannin's spread, the Jay Bar ranks concentrated only on the Dawson element. Fighting like wildmen, their backs to the bar, Monte Gordon, Buff Anderson and Shorty Catlin showed the Dawson crowd the mettle of the Jay Bar Pee. They never wavered. They stood side by side with Montana and shot, their guns hot in their hands. They made a shambles out of the *Santos Rojos.*

If death had held high carnival during the fighting in the Los Dedos Basin, it went completely berserk here. It went on a blood-spree in the *Santos Rojos.* No more deadly duel between men had ever taken place in the Pecos Valley where in Jim Parkins' time mass fights had been a rule rather than an exception. Only by some miracle Montana Larkin and Bull Tate fought unscathed. Providence might have had something to do with it, or perhaps it was just luck. But whatever it was that watched over them in their fight for decency they seemed immune from the wailing death that whined about them and took toll of their friends.

Dead men lay at their feet. Along the pine-board walls they lay in heaps. The sawdust on the floor was stained with red. The walls were splintered. Splatters of human blood in places marked the passage of a bullet through a human body. Suddenly the balance of Dawson's hired assassins threw down their guns. Of the twenty, only seven remained standing. At the top of his lungs Dawson started bellowing at them to keep on fighting. But the Canadian River gunmen had enough of the brand of fighting in vogue just then

along the Pecos. They quit and that was all there was to it. For them, the revenue that might have been had in Pecos, was a thing of the past. A pleasant dream sadly interrupted by deadly bullets. As for the O Bar O waddies, well, what the Double O bunch left, there was hardly enough of them remaining to continue a fight. Four of them stood in the middle of the floor, their hands high in the air, knowing that there would be no more bonuses in their pay envelopes from Fannin for slapping a bar now and then between the O's on the Double O cattle. Fannin's crookedness was at an end and so was Taos Dawson's. But he refused to recognize it, at least for the moment.

He stood up suddenly from behind his table. Tate saw him instantly. There was no mistaking Dawson's intentions. He was going to try for a last minute shot at the man who had blasted away the fingers from his right hand that time over along the Canadian. He had made up his mind that he was going to kill Tate and then throw down his gun, trusting that he would be allowed to leave town. Tate sensed his intention by the way he glared at him. He was ready. They stood face to face now with their guns trained on each other.

The others had ceased shooting now. The *Santos Rojos* would have been still as a morgue except for the frequent groans of the wounded. And there were few of them. Too few! When men shot there, they had shot to kill and at the close quarters at which they had fought it out, death easily predominated over injury.

"Yuh're gittin' yuhrn now, Tate!" Dawson roared suddenly, and his voice was as deadly as his eyes. "Ef I'm finished here, yuh're finished with me! Ef yuh shoot me, I shoot yuh afore I drop! But yuh ain't shootin' me, hombre, fer I'm lettin' go fust ——"

And even as he finished he let his hammer fall. The click of the pin falling on an empty cartridge was drowned out by the crash of Tate's twin six-shooters. A look of dismay spread across Dawson's face as if he realized that his gun was empty. He seemed to straighten slowly to his full height, dropping his gun and by instinct alone shoving his left hand toward the reversed butt of his other pistol. But he was dead on his feet, and appeared to move toward his other gun only because some hidden force compelled him to do so.

His hand just touched the butt of his gun and that was all. Suddenly his legs collapsed under him. The whites of his eyes showed plainly in the light of the swinging lamps suspended from the ceiling. He dropped in a heap and stretched out slowly.

"Waal—I reckon that gives the devil another coal heaver, Montany!" Tate grunted abruptly, jamming his left gun into its holster. "Wonder where that whelp o' a Burt Kelton is? Do yuh reckon he pulled his freight out o' here when he found out we was comin'?"

"I was wonderin' the same thing, Tate," said Montana, eyeing the remnants of Dawson's gun squad. "Any o' yuh jaspers know where the sheriff went? Or was he here this evenin'?"

"He was here, *amigo,*" replied one of them humbly, "but he skipped when

Dawson started oratin'! What a helluva he-hombre yuh got fer a sheriff in this town!"

"Yuh mean ex-sheriff, pardner!" said Tate bluntly. "Where'd he skip to?"

"How should we know?" the desperado growled. "We ain't interested now anyway. What we want t' know is what yuh're gunna do with us?"

"We ain't decided," Tate retorted significantly, "but ef I had my way, we'd take yuh out t' the nearest tree an' string yuh up!"

The Jay Bar twisters chorused their agreement to that. But they knew that Montana had other plans for their disposal.

"Yuh jaspers are grabbin' the first rattler out o' Pecos!" the buckeroo informed them. "There'll be a train rollin' through in about half an hour! Yuh gents are gonna get on it an' yuh ain't ever comin' back t' Pecos! *Sabe amigos?* Never! If yuh do, yuh'll be hauled out feet first!"

"Yuh're doin' the tellin', Larkin!" the gunman said. "I reckon we ain't hankerin' t' come back! Dawson said yuh was a bunch o' yokels here. But ef yuh-all fight like yuh do, I reckon I prefer plumb smart jaspers!"

"All right!" Montana grunted. "Git goin'!" He turned abruptly to Shorty Catlin. "Take a couple o' boys an' round up them janes upstairs, Shorty! I reckon they'll be hankerin' t' grab that rattler also! Go easy on 'em! They might turn an' bite yuh!"

Catlin went quickly to the stairway, followed by Monte and Buff. A couple of Double O and Circle X waddies trailed after them to watch the fun and lend a hand if necessary. In a jiffy they returned, herding before them a dozen of Dawson's entertainers. They were a sorry-looking lot of degraded femininity, but they were ready to travel. Through knot-holes in the floor above they had watched the abrupt fall of Taos Dawson and knew that Pecos had been put through the wash at last.

Things happened swiftly from then on. So swiftly in fact that an ordinary man might have been left bewildered and confused. But not Montana Larkin and Bull Tate. They knew exactly what they were doing and they lost no time in rounding up the remnants of Dawson's crowd and herding them in the direction of the depot.

It was not until they were within sight of the railroad station that stood in a plaza on the west end of Main Street that Montana learned of the whereabouts of Burt Kelton. Dusk was fast settling into night when he came into that welcome information. It came to him in the form of Colonel Tip Collins, a quite unexpected medium. Running drunkenly through the mud, he overtook the Dawson farewell procession made up of the remnants of the *Santos Rojos* bunch and a crowd of curious followers, and almost collapsed at Montana's feet. His bared head was covered with blood which had run down his left cheek and dribbled over his shirt-front. It was not too dark for the buckeroo to recognize him instantly and to observe that across his skull was a dangerous gash as if he had been clubbed with a pistol-butt.

"Good Lord, Tip!" He grasped the old man roughly beneath the shoulders and hauled him erect. "What's wrong?"

"He hit me with a gun-butt, Montany!" Tip gasped, panting hard. "Knocked me cold! He's there now—at my place! Got Maw locked in a closet an' is raisin' hell with Margy!"

"Who?" Montana barked with sudden fury. "Who's raisin' hell with Margy? Speak up, Tip! Who yuh talkin' about?"

"Kelton—Burt Kelton!" panted the old man laboriously. "He come t' the house about a half hour ago! Knocked me out, but I come t' pronto an' sneaked away t' find yuh! That jasper's gone plumb loco, Montany! Yuh better go there!"

"Burt Kelton, eh?" Montana stormed instantly as if hell had burst loose within his very soul. "I knowed that Fannin would blow off about her bein' in town! If I'd had sense, I'd have guessed where Kelton was! The dirty *orejana*! Tate, yuh see that this bunch gets on that train! She's comin' in now! I'm goin' t' the Collins place! See yuh there, an' fetch Tip when yuh come!"

He had been leading Skyrocket behind him. But he was in the saddle even before he finished. The awed crowd watched him whirl the big Morgan around on two legs. As he tore away he showered them with clots of mud from the gelding's flying hoofs. He thundered up the street and vanished in the deepening gloom like a fleeing ghost. Just then the train whistled sharply as it approached the depot. Tip Collins' weary old legs were almost too weak to hold him up now and Tate hoisted him onto his horse. They went swiftly to the depot where the exodus of the Dawson element became complete. Entertainers from several other questionable resorts were already at the station. West-bound tourists on the train wondered what it was all about as they stared from the windows. The Double O and Circle X waddies gave them an inkling of what was happening when they suddenly pulled their guns and fired a significant volley into the sky as a warning to the imported gunmen fortunate enough to take their departure on the hoof. They watched the train pull out and then retreated back toward the Red Onion.

Montana Larkin slid Skyrocket to a halt in a shower of mud at the front gate of the Collins home. He did not take time to step down and open it. Instead he leaped from his saddle over the fence and into the yard. Running swiftly he raced up the narrow, flower-lined pathway and took the steps to the porch in a flying leap. The front door was locked and the window shades were pulled far down. But there was a light in the parlor. And there was more!

Margy Parkins was in that room. He heard her terror-filled voice as she fought off the man who for a long time had yearned for her. He also heard the sharp, liquor-laden voice of Burt Kelton mumbling vicious words to her. Then Montana Larkin went on the prod and saw red. He went suddenly insane with blind fury. He heard Margy scream abruptly at Kelton to let her

alone. In a blind rage he stepped back and flung himself at the door. It crashed in before him and he fell headlong into a narrow vestibule. But he was up in a flash and charging into the parlor.

Sheriff Burt Kelton, his face flushed with the effects of cheap whiskey and uncontrollable passion, sprang to his feet. Montana could have killed him just then. But in his insane frame of mind, quick death was too good for Burt Kelton. His soul cried out for revenge. But he wanted it with his bare hands—anything but guns.

Burt looked at him for an instant, his eyes startled. Montana's face was hard as he stood crouched just inside the room. He was a creature of steel nerves and of cold ruthlessness. Kelton caught the deadly light in his eyes and his courage quit him instantly. His flushed face became suddenly pale and he licked his dry, feverish lips.

"Yuh—Larkin!" he mumbled almost incoherently as Margy, with her blouse torn from one shoulder, her hair dishevelled, leaped away from him. The buckeroo waved her aside as she started toward him. "Yuh!" Burt repeated again, slowly. "How come yuh're here? I expected Dawson t' settle yuhr hash, Larkin!"

"That's what I figgered, Kelton!" the buckeroo stormed blindly. "That's what I figgered; Fannin told yuh Margy was in town—at this house! When yuh found out from Carson that we was on our way t' the *Santos Rojos* t' clean it up, yuh jes' skipped out an' come here, thinkin' I'd never get past Dawson's gunmen! But I did get past 'em, Kelton! But yuh're not gettin' past me! I warned yuh afore t' keep away from Margy Parkins! If it hadn't been for yuhr crooked doin's, her dad would be livin' t'day! By Gawd, I'm gonna kill yuh this time, Kelton! I'm gonna whip the hide clear off'n yuhr rotten bones! Unbuckle them belts an' let yuhr guns fall, Burt!"

Like a streak of lightning Montana Larkin's six-shooter leaped into his hand. Kelton groaned and stepped back. His hands began fumbling nervously at his belt buckles.

"Let 'em fall, Kelton!" the buckeroo barked, and Burt's twin .45's thudded on the carpet. He shoved his hands high over his head, whipped by fear.

"What are you going to do, Montana?" Margy demanded from the dining room door where she stood looking on. Her eyes were filled with fear and horror.

"This *orejana* ain't no match for me with guns, Margy!" Montana snapped. "He knows it better'n anybody! I'm gonna give him a chance he wouldn't even give a dog!"

He stepped up suddenly and kicked Kelton's guns aside. Swiftly he unbuckled his own belt and hurled it and his gun onto the sofa. Wonderingly, Margy saw him step up to the fireplace. Over the mantel, fixed on a plush-covered board, hung a pair of great, Texas longhorns. Crossed beneath them were draped two heavy bull whips which Colonel Tip had kept as relics from his days of freighting supplies from Laredo to the Pecos Valley. Montana

snatched them from the wall, shook them out to test the flexibility and flung one to Kelton.

"Take that whip, Kelton!" he ordered viciously. "Take it an' fight back! We're standin' on even ground now, an' if yuh ain't yaller clear t' the core, yuh'll fight back at me!"

Hesitantly Kelton picked up his whip and looked at it curiously. Never before had he ever as much as held one in his hands. But then neither had Montana Larkin. They were relics of the past, of another generation, when men drove oxen instead of horses. And Colonel Tip proudly kept them oiled and flexible. In their heyday they had been close to thirty feet long. He had been an expert in using them and could have flicked a fly from the ear of an ox with as little effort as he would fill his pipe. But long usage had worn them down until now they were no more than six or seven feet in length from the handle. Each one, instead of having frayed leather for a cracker, possessed a large knot as hard as rock at its tip-end, and no more deadly weapon could Montana Larkin have chosen to use in placing himself on even terms with Burt Kelton.

"I ain't ever used one o' these things, Larkin!" said Kelton plaintively. His saffron streak was beginning to sweep over him completely as he appraised the deadly knots. " 'Tain't fair!"

"Yuh're plain yaller, Kelton!" the buckeroo jeered at him. "But go ahead an' whine! It won't do yuh no good! Yuh're gonna fight back or take everything I give yuh! Yuh ready, Burt?"

He whipped his weapon through the air. The heavy knot whistled within an inch of the sheriff's pallid face. He ducked back and then Montana let him have a stinging sweep across the shoulders. As if that blow aroused Kelton to his serious predicament, he swung back his own whip and let fly. Expertly the buckeroo ducked the heavy knot as agilely as he might duck under the blow of a fist. The knot sang harmlessly over his head. Quick as lightning he swung his own whip again. The heavy leather coiled over Kelton's shoulders with a whistling hiss. Kelton stiffened as if he had been burned across the back with a hot iron. Margy cried out in protest and hid her face in her hands. Then the sounds of Maw Collins kicking at the door of her closet prison attracted her attention. She went forward to release her.

As if her departure was a signal for Montana Larkin to settle down earnestly to his task of whipping the life out of Burt Kelton, he went into action with a cold menace. Nimbly he dodged Kelton's blows. The sheriff's aim was bad, or his nerves were so shattered with fear that in a half dozen attempts he failed repeatedly to land a blow. But each time Montana swung, he sent burning leather across Kelton's back. Within a moment the sheriff's shirt was in shreds and his back was gushing blood. Great blue welts rose there like magic and he started laughing suddenly in an hysterical tone.

Suddenly he managed to deliver a clean blow that burned the length of the buckeroo's broad back. He winced as the heavy leather bit through his shirt,

but gave no sign that it hurt. His face was a cold mask, as deadly as death itself. Like snakes the whips hissed through the air. The room was a large one, fortunately, and the ceiling was high. They had ample space in which to give full power to their swings. For a few moments they stood at whip-length and flailed each other murderously. Seeing his whip curling over his enemy's torso something of Kelton's courage returned to him. He was fighting for his life now and knew it. One direct blow on the head from that heavy knot would crush it in like an egg shell. He knew that, too, and he struggled to keep out of its way.

But Kelton might have tried to dodge hot lead. Montana stepped back suddenly and measured the distance between them. He was getting the knack of handling that bull whip now. Abruptly as Burt was bunching his muscles for a vicious swing at him, he flicked out the knotted rawhide. It nailed Kelton squarely on the chest with the sound of a pistol shot. Kelton went sprawling backward as if he had been kicked by a mule. A great lump materialized on the spot and a bit of bloody foam mounted on his colorless lips. He let out a helpless groan, wondering if his ribs had been crushed in.

Montana's merciless whip, curling around the small of his back as he sat up brought him to his feet again. Relentlessly the buckeroo flogged him. His shirt was in ribbons now and his bare skin was a mass of welts and bloody gore.

"Give it to him, Montana!" Maw Collins, free now, cried from the dining room. But Montana never knew she was there. He failed even to hear her encouraging voice. "Teach the whelp a lesson!" she encouraged angrily. "Whip him until he cain't stand!"

Margy kept her eyes from the scene. It was too terrible for her to look at. Her chief concern now was for the buckeroo's safety. He, too, was blood from head to foot, and his shirt was ripped in a dozen places across front and back. The rawhide whined and hissed like snakes. Each time Montana delivered a blow, Kelton whimpered. The buckeroo took his without a sound and there was a grim smile on his cold face now. He saw Kelton weakening swiftly. His legs were trembling and his blows had lost much of their snap and power. He was desperate and he struggled to get in a killing blow.

Montana gave him few opportunities and went after him mercilessly. Longingly Kelton glanced toward the sofa upon which lay the buckeroo's .45. Suddenly he dropped his whip and made a dive for it.

"Watch him, Montany! He's goin' fer that gun!" Tate and Colonel Tip had entered the vestibule unobserved only a brief moment before and had been standing just outside the parlor door, watching the strange battle in silence. As he shouted his warning, Tate drew one of his guns to guard the buckeroo against the sheriff's treachery.

But Montana Larkin had been on the alert. Promptly as Kelton dove for the gun he drew back his whip menacingly. With an ominous hiss the heavy knot darted forward like the head of an angry serpent. In silent admiration

for his aim, Colonel Tip saw that deadly chunk of hard, flinty leather, hard enough to split the tough hide of a bull oxen, strike a spot directly behind Burt Kelton's ear. It made an ugly, crunching sound, like a bullet flattening against bone and flesh.

Kelton halted in his tracks, threw up his arms wildly and dropped. He might have been clubbed from behind, so much power had Montana put into that fierce blow. A look of intense agony spread over his face. His lips opened as if he meant to speak. But no words formed there, only a low rattle that started with a wheeze deep in his throat. Blood gushed suddenly from behind his ear, staining Maw Collins' carpet. Then his whole torso heaved up. His eyes popped and he struggled desperately as if to catch a breath of air. His face twisted with a grimace of pain and then he relaxed. Sheriff Burt Kelton reached the end of a crooked career. Even as he died thin streams of blood started running from the sides of his mouth. They did not know it, but the blow he had taken in the chest had fractured two of his ribs, one of which, driven inward by the heavy knot, had punctured a lung. But a crunched skull had brought about his abrupt end.

Feeling suddenly sick, Montana threw aside his whip and sat down in a chair. He found himself weak and trembling and nauseated at the manner in which he had killed his arch enemy. Montana Larkin, tough as his hide was, was far from being callous to death, particularly this kind. But he knew it was justified and there had been no other way. He ran a weary hand over his tired eyes. Margy rushed up to him and flung her arms about his neck.

"Oh, Montana!" she cried. "You are hurt!"

"Jes' tired an' kinda sick at the stomach, *chiquita,*" he said in a weary voice. "Yuh all right, maam?"

"Yes," she breathed. "The dog! Oh, how I despise that man, *querido*!"

"He'll never bother yuh again, Margy," he said simply, pulling her around to his knees. She came easily and sat down there. He held her close to him.

"Yuh shore said it, Montany!" said Tate facetiously. "He won't bother anybody no more! Waal—I reckon the devil needed another coal heaver, anyhow! Yuh stayin' here t'night?"

"Yes indeedy he is!" spoke up Maw Collins promptly. "The boy is all tuckered out! I won't hear o' him leavin' ontil he's rested up. We've got room for you, too, if you will stay."

"*Gracias,* maam," said Tate gratefully. "Plumb nice o' yuh, but I reckon I cain't make it t'night."

"Why not, Tate?" inquired Colonel Tip curiously. He had taken time at the depot to wash the blood from his head and face. The gash along his scalp had long since stopped bleeding. But his gray hair was matted over the wound. Montana glanced up at him with a grin.

"He's got a date with the girl from the Land Office, Tip," he volunteered. "Nothin' could stop him from keepin' that, I reckon."

"Yuh're plumb right, Montany," Tate grinned back. "Not even Taos

Dawson an' his imported trigger-men. But that ain't exactly why I cain't stay here t'night. We're gettin' out at sunup for my ranch in the Los Dedos!"

"We?" Montana gave him a strange look and exchanged puzzled glances with Margy. "Who's *we,* Tate? Yuh don't mean ——?"

"Shore I mean it, Montany!" Tate broke in, aware that his face was flaming. "I fergot t' tell yuh. Georgia an' me are gettin' married t'night! I asked her this evenin' when I took her home from the courthouse!"

"Well, I'll be durned!" Montana suddenly forgot his weariness. "Why, yuh only met the girl two-three days ago, yuh pore maverick! Yuh sure are a plumb fast worker, I'll say!"

"Yuh bet I work fast," said Tate solemnly, glancing at Maw Collins. She was beaming up at him and Colonel Tip was grinning reminiscently. "It's the only way t' git what yuh want in this vale o' tears. As for only meetin' Georgia, waal—it seems like we knowed each other for years! She said so herself!"

"Them's words o' wisdom, Tate," remarked Colonel Tip. "I only knowed Maw twenty-four hours afore we got married. Marry 'em afore they change their minds was allus my policy, an' that's a tip fer yuh, Montany Larkin!"

"Yeah," said the buckeroo with a grin. "But once Margy makes up her mind, she never changes it. Do yuh, *chiquita*?"

"No, I don't," she said. "And don't you go suggesting that I do! I'm going to make you wait until June just to show you that I'm boss!"

Montana groaned and looked enviously at Tate.

"I reckon that's that," he said humbly. "Yuh're a lucky galoot, Tate! Yuh don't have t' wait. Well, the longer a jasper waits for what he wants, the sweeter it tastes!"

She kissed him for that as Tip and Maw Collins followed Tate to the door.

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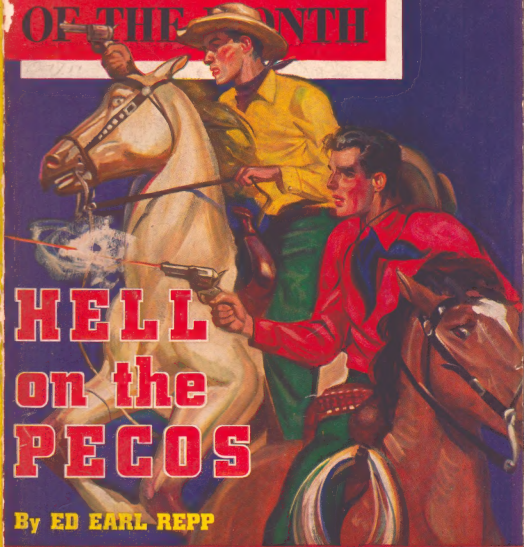

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